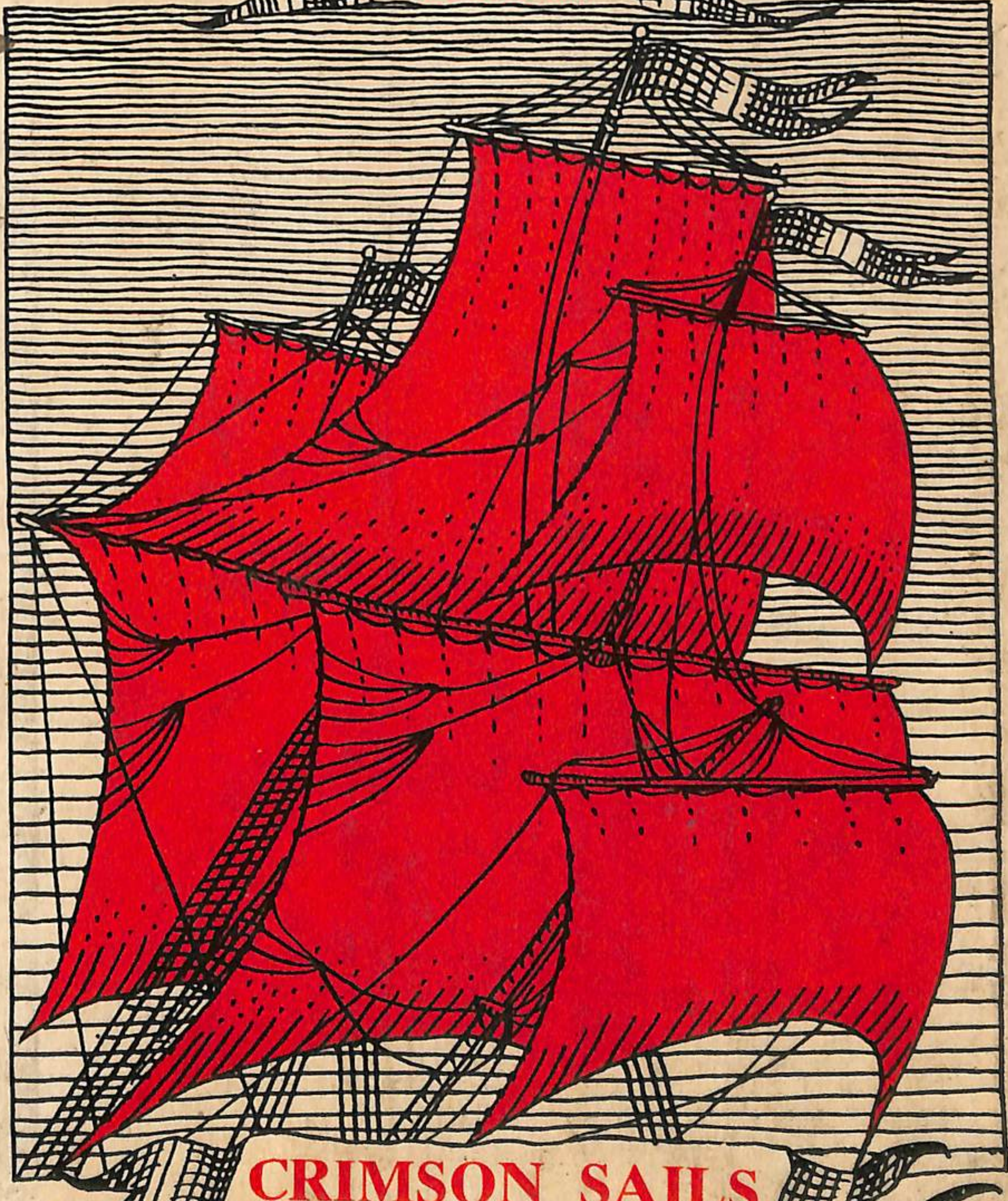
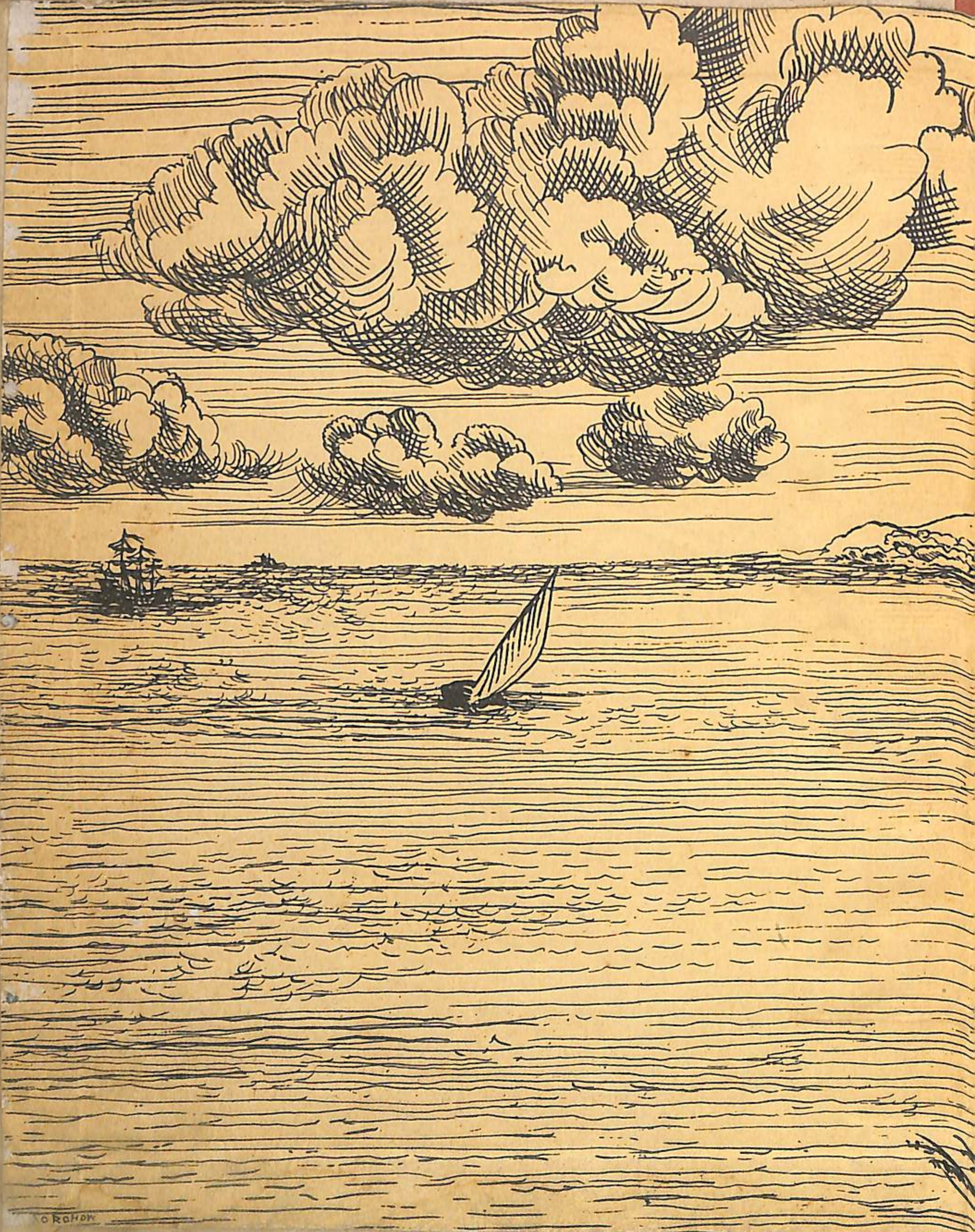
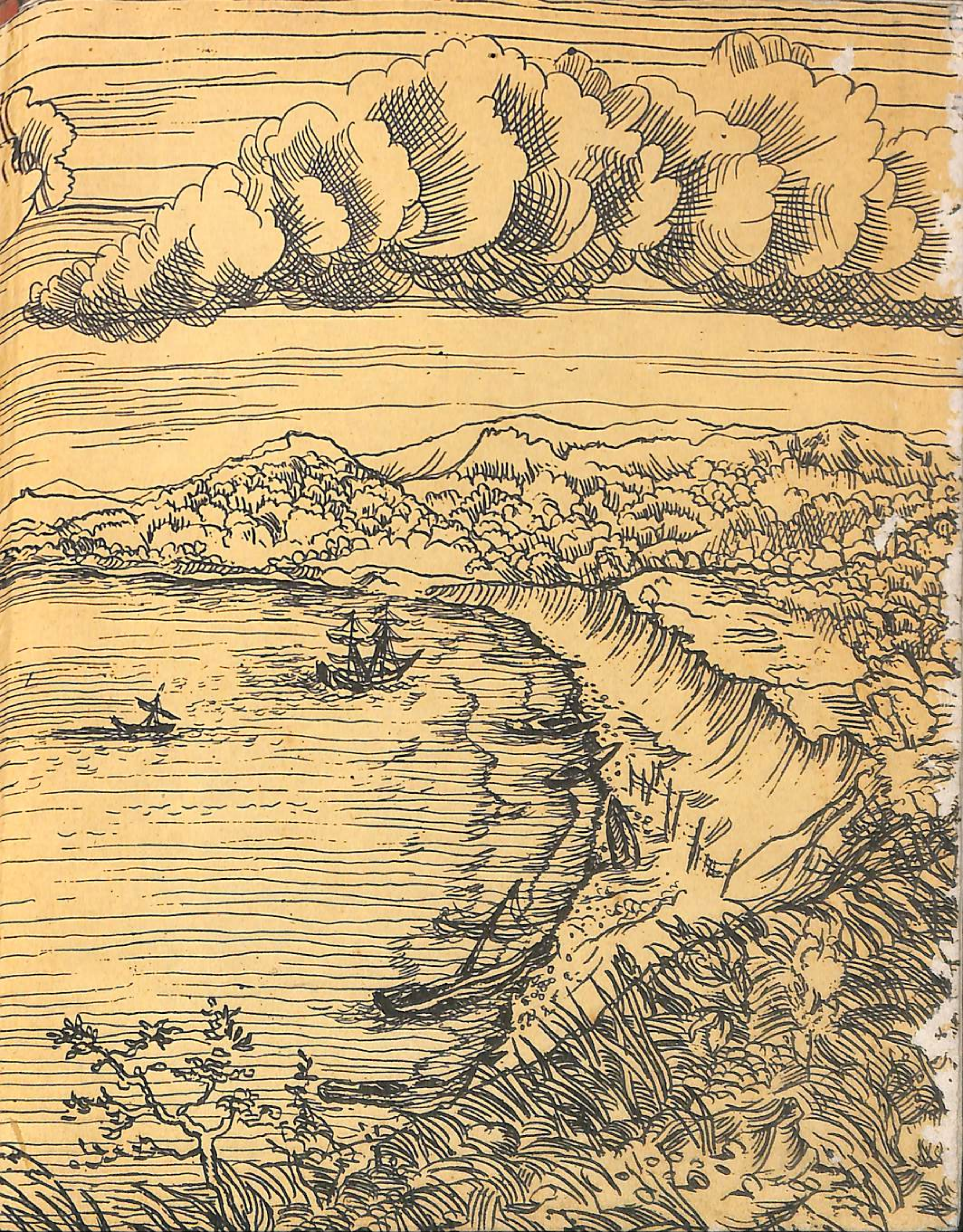
A. GRIN



CRIMSON SAILS

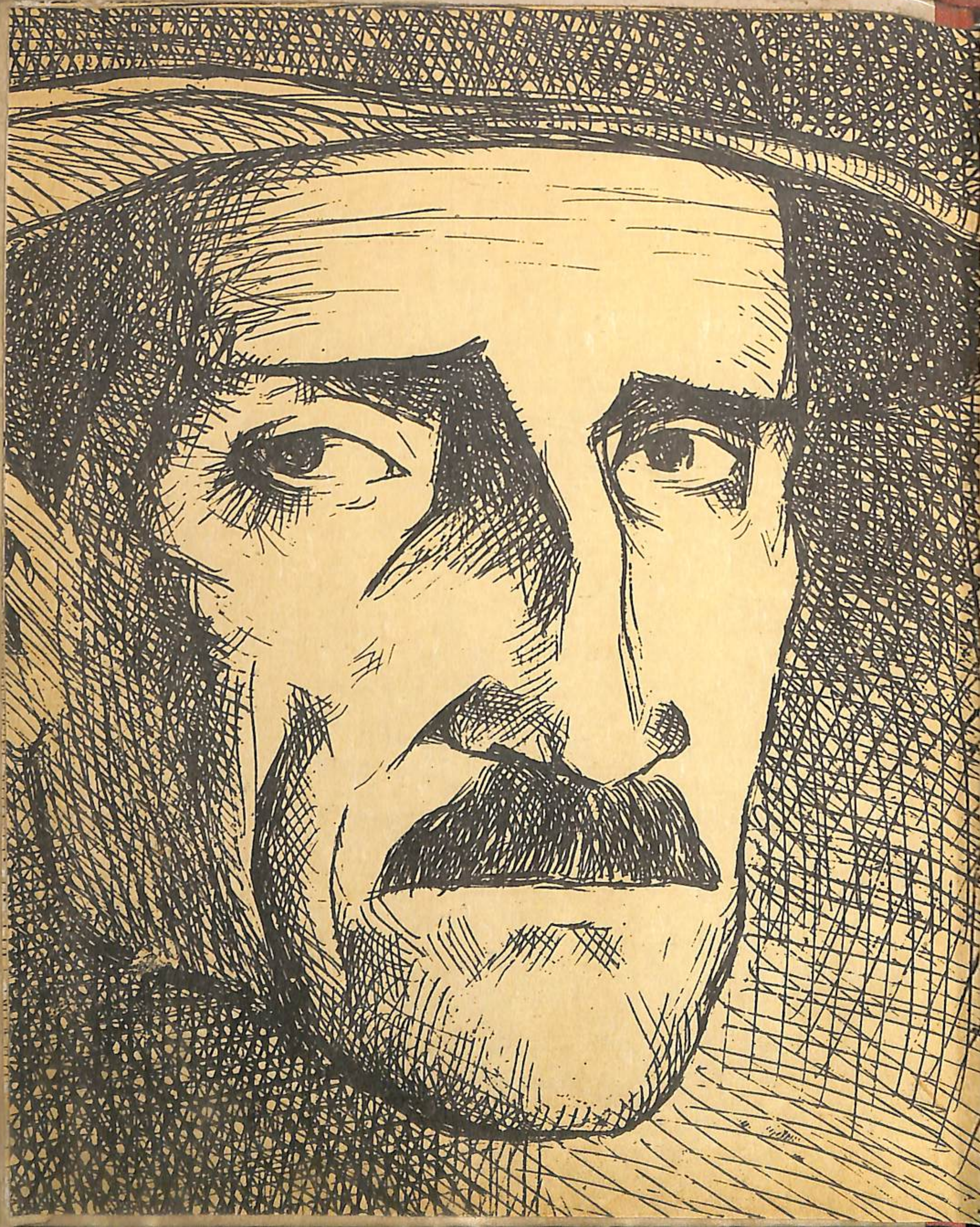




ALEXANDER GRIN

CRIMSON SAILS

MOSCOW PROGRESS PUBLISHERS



A. GRIN

THE LIFE OF ALEXANDER GRIN

Translated by Alex Miller

CRIMSON SAILS

A Fantasy

Translated by Fainna Glagoleva

THE SNAKE

Translated by Nicholas Luker

HIS FATHER'S WRATH

Translated by Alex Miller

THE PORT COMMANDANT

Translated by Barry Scherr

Translated from the Russian
Illustrated by *Mikhail Dorokhov*

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THE LIFE OF ALEXANDER GRIN*

Alexander Stepanovich Grinevsky, who wrote under the pen-name of Alexander Grin, died in July 1932 in Stary Krym, a little town notable for its centuries-old nut-trees.

He had a hard life. It was as if everything conspired to turn him into a criminal or an embittered philistine. And yet, in spite of the unbelievable odds, this gloomy man preserved unblemished all through his tormented life a powerful imagination, purity of feeling and a shy smile.

Grin's life was a merciless condemnation of the pre-revolutionary structure of human relationships. The old Russia treated Grin cruelly: it deprived him in early childhood of a love for reality. His circumstances were appalling and life did not seem worth living; it was like a savage lynching party. Grin survived, but his distrust of reality stayed with him for the rest of his life. He was always trying to escape, believing that it was better to live by elusive dreams than by the "rubbish and garbage" of day-to-day existence.

Grin became a writer, creating in his books a world of cheerful, courageous people, a beautiful earth with fragrant woodlands and abundant sunshine, an earth not shown on the map, and describing remarkable events that made the head spin like a sip of heady wine.

"I had always noticed the same thing everywhere: stories, however interesting, were enjoyed only because they afforded people an hour's forgetfulness of their wretched, but accustomed life," wrote Maxim Gorky in his book My Universities.

This is wholly true of Grin.

Russian life, for him, was limited to the philistine town of Vyatka, a dirty vocational training school, doss houses, backbreaking work,

* Foreword (abridged) to the *Selected Works* of Alexander Grin, Khudozhestvennaya Literatura Publishers, Moscow, 1956 (in Russian).

prison and permanent hunger. Somewhere beyond the grey line of the horizon, however, there shone lands of light, sea breezes and flowering grasses. Sun-tanned people lived there: gold-prospectors, trappers, artists, high-spirited tramps, women who were as cheerful and gentle as children and, above all, seafarers.

Grin was sustained by the belief that such lands flower and murmur on the islands of the ocean far away.

The revolution came. It was the beginning of the end to much that had oppressed Grin: the bestial structure of the old human relations, exploitation, ostracism—everything that had made him flee life for the world of dreams and books.

Grin was sincerely overjoyed by the coming of the revolution, but the beautiful prospects of a new future that it opened up were still only dimly visible, and he was one of those afflicted with chronic impatience.

When the revolution came, it was not in festive array, but like a battle-stained soldier or like a surgeon. It ploughed up centuries-old layers of rot and decay.

The bright future seemed very far away to Grin, and he wanted to experience it now, immediately. He wanted to breathe the pure air of cities, to be blessed with the murmur of trees and the sound of children's laughter; he wanted to enter the houses of the people there, join them on thrilling explorations and share with them their meaningful and happy existence.

Reality could not give all this to Grin straightaway. Only imagination could take him to the longed for world of extraordinary events and people.

Grin's father took part in the Polish uprising of 1863 and was banished to Vyatka, where he worked as an accounts clerk in a hospital, took to drink, and died in poverty.

His son Alexander, the future writer, was a dreamy, impatient, absent-minded little boy. He had many enthusiasms, but never finished anything. He was bad at his school work, but had a passion for the stories of Mayne Reid, Jules Verne, Gustave Aimard and Jacolliot.

"The words Orinoco, Mississippi and Sumatra were like music to me," said Grin later about this period of his life.

It is difficult for young people of today to understand what a powerful impact these writers had on children living in the remoter parts of the old Russia. "To grasp this," says Grin in his autobiography, "you have to have known provincial life in a town at the back of nowhere in those times. The atmosphere of strained nerves, false pride and shame is conveyed best of all in Chekhov's story 'My Life'. When I read it, I felt I was reading about Vyatka in detail."

Even as a child, Grin had a very precise imagination. When he became a writer, he saw the non-existent countries, where the action of his short stories took place, not as misty landscapes, but as places which he had studied closely and had visited hundreds of times.

He could have drawn a detailed map of them, noting each turn in the road, the type of vegetation, every bend in the river, and the disposition of the houses; and he could, finally, have enumerated all the ships in non-existent harbours with all the nautical details and all the characteristics of their carefree and life-loving crews.

Here is one of these detailed non-existent landscapes. In his short story, "The Colony of Lanfier", Grin writes:

"In the north, dark and unmoving like a green herd, the forest followed, as far as the horizon, a line of chalk cliffs relieved here and there by crevasses and patches of withered scrub.

"In the east, on the far side of the lake, wound the white ribbon of the road that led out of the town. Its edges were blanked here and there with trees as tiny as lettuce shoots.

"In the west, enclosing a plain that was gouged with hills and gullies, stretched the deep-blue, sparkling mirror surface of the ocean.

"And to the south, from the centre of a shallow crater whose sides were dotted with colourful houses and farms surrounded by carelessly planted vegetation, stretched the sloping rectangular plantations and ploughed fields of the colony of Lanfier."

When Grin died, he left it to us to decide whether or not our age needs such passionate dreamers.

Yes, we need them. It is time to stop treating the word "dreamer"

as a joke. Many people do not yet know how to dream, and perhaps that is why they can never keep up with the times.

If we deprive a man of the ability to dream, we lose one of the most powerful incentives to progress in culture, art, science and the struggle for a beautiful future. Dreams should not, however, be divorced from reality; they should foretell the future and make us feel that we are already living in that future and are ourselves changing.

It is usually thought that Grin's dreams were divorced from life and were an eccentric and meaningless play of the mind. It is usually thought Grin was a writer of adventure stories—a master of plot, it is true, but one whose books were devoid of social significance.

The significance of a writer is determined by the effect he has on us, by the feelings, thoughts and behaviour his books inspire, and by whether they increase our knowledge or are simply read through as an entertaining sequence of words.

Grin peopled his books with a proud, unselfish and kind-hearted race of childlike simplicity.

These attractive, wholesome people breathe the fresh, fragrant air of Grin's natural landscape, which is absolutely real and touches the heart with its irresistible charm. The world inhabited by Grin's characters could only seem unreal to the poor in spirit. Anyone who has experienced that slight dizziness at the first lungful of the salty, warm air on the sea coast will at once acknowledge the authenticity of Grin's scenery.

Grin's stories inspire a yearning for an exciting life full of risk, adventure and that "sense of the sublime" so typical of explorers, seafarers, and travellers. After Grin's stories, the reader wants to see the whole world—not the writer's countries of the imagination, but real, genuine ones full of light, with their forests, with the multilingual hubbub of their harbours, and with human passion and love.

"The world tantalizes me," wrote Grin. "Its oceans are vast, its islands without number, and there are so many mysterious, fatally fascinating nooks and crannies."

Grown-ups, as well as children, need fairy-tales, for fairy-tales arouse the excitement that is the source of lofty and humane passions. They do not let us become complacent, they reveal to us ever new and sparkling horizons, they show us another kind of life, they disturb us

and make us passionately long for that life. This is their virtue, and this is the virtue of the powerful charm of Grin's short stories, though it is not always expressible in words.

Attention has been drawn to the element of adventure in Grin's plots. Adventure there undoubtedly is, but it is only the outer shell for greater depth of content. One would have to be blind not to see the love of humanity in Grin's books.

Grin was not only a magnificent landscape-painter and storyteller, he was a very subtle psychologist. He wrote of self-sacrifice, courage and heroism in the most ordinary people. He wrote of love for work and for his own profession, and of the might and unfathomability of nature. Afinally, few writers wrote as purely, delicately and emotionally about woman as Grin.

I could quote hundreds of excerpts from Grin's books that can move anyone who has not lost the capacity to be moved by beauty, but the reader will find them for himself.

Grin said: "The whole earth, with all that is on it, is given to us for life, for the recognition of that life wherever it exists."

Grin is a writer needed by our times, for he made his contribution to the development of the lofty feelings without which a socialist society can never be brought to fulfilment.

K. PAUSTOVSKY

CRIMSON SAILS

A fantasy

Presented and dedicated to
Nina Nikolayevna Grin
by the AUTHOR
November 22, 1922
Petrograd

I

THE PROPHESY

Longren, a sailor of the *Orion*, a rugged, three-hundred-ton brig on which he had served for ten years and to which he was attached more strongly than some sons are to their mothers, was finally forced to give up the sea.

This is how it came about. During one of his infrequent visits home he did not, as he always had, see his wife Mary from afar, standing on the doorstep, throwing up her hands and then running breathlessly towards him. Instead, he found a distraught neighbour woman by the crib, a new piece of furniture in his small house.

"I tended her for three months, neighbour," the woman said. "Here's your daughter."

Longren's heart was numb with grief as he bent down and saw an eight-month-old mite peering intently at his long beard. Then he sat down, stared at the floor and began to twirl his moustache. It was wet as from the rain.

"When did Mary die?" he asked.

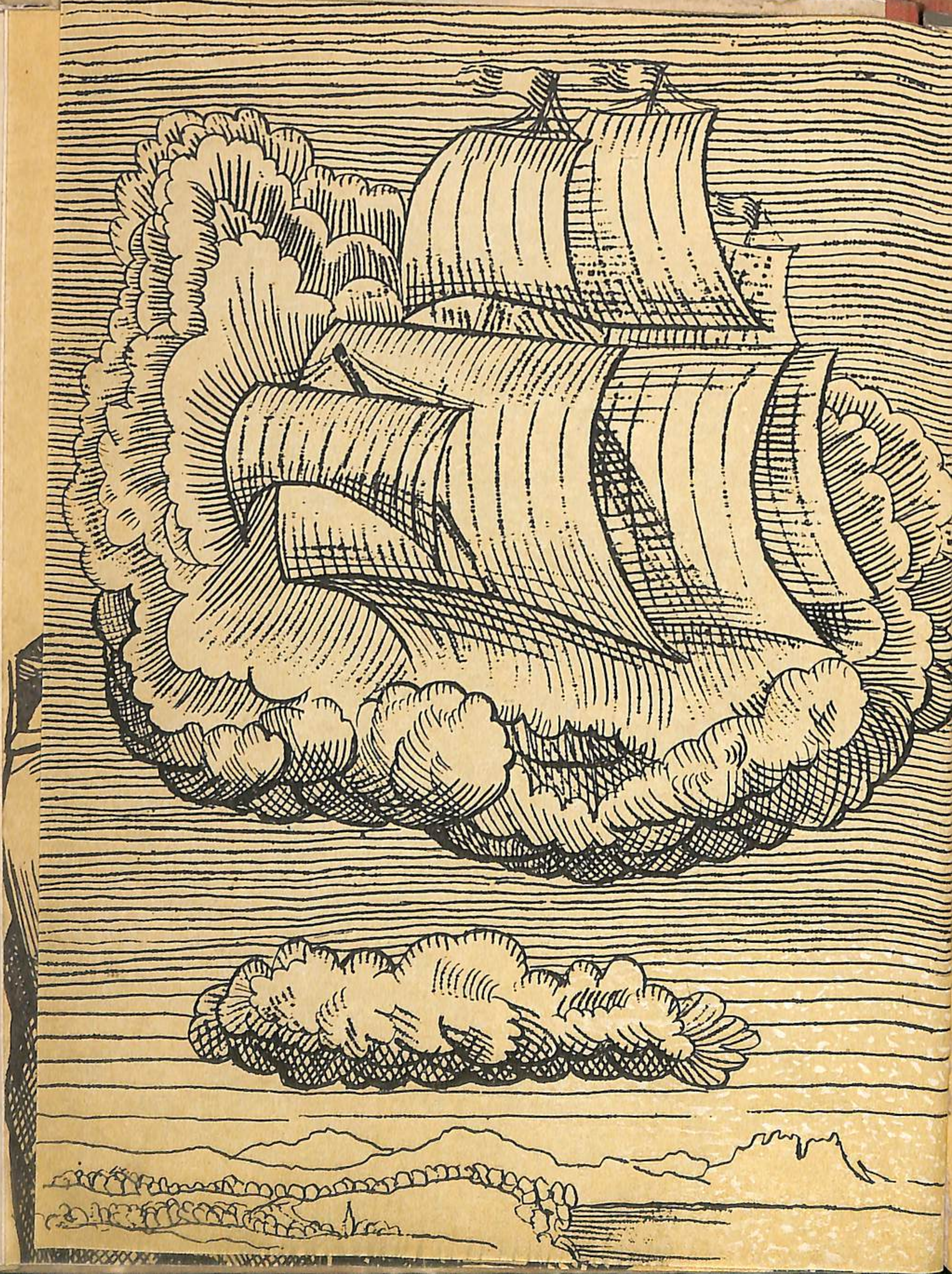
The woman recounted the sad tale, interrupting herself to coo fondly at the child and assure him that Mary was now in Heaven. When Longren learned the details, Heaven seemed to him not much brighter than the woodshed, and he felt that the light of a plain lamp, were the three of them together now, would have been a joy unsurpassed to the woman who had gone on to the unknown Beyond.

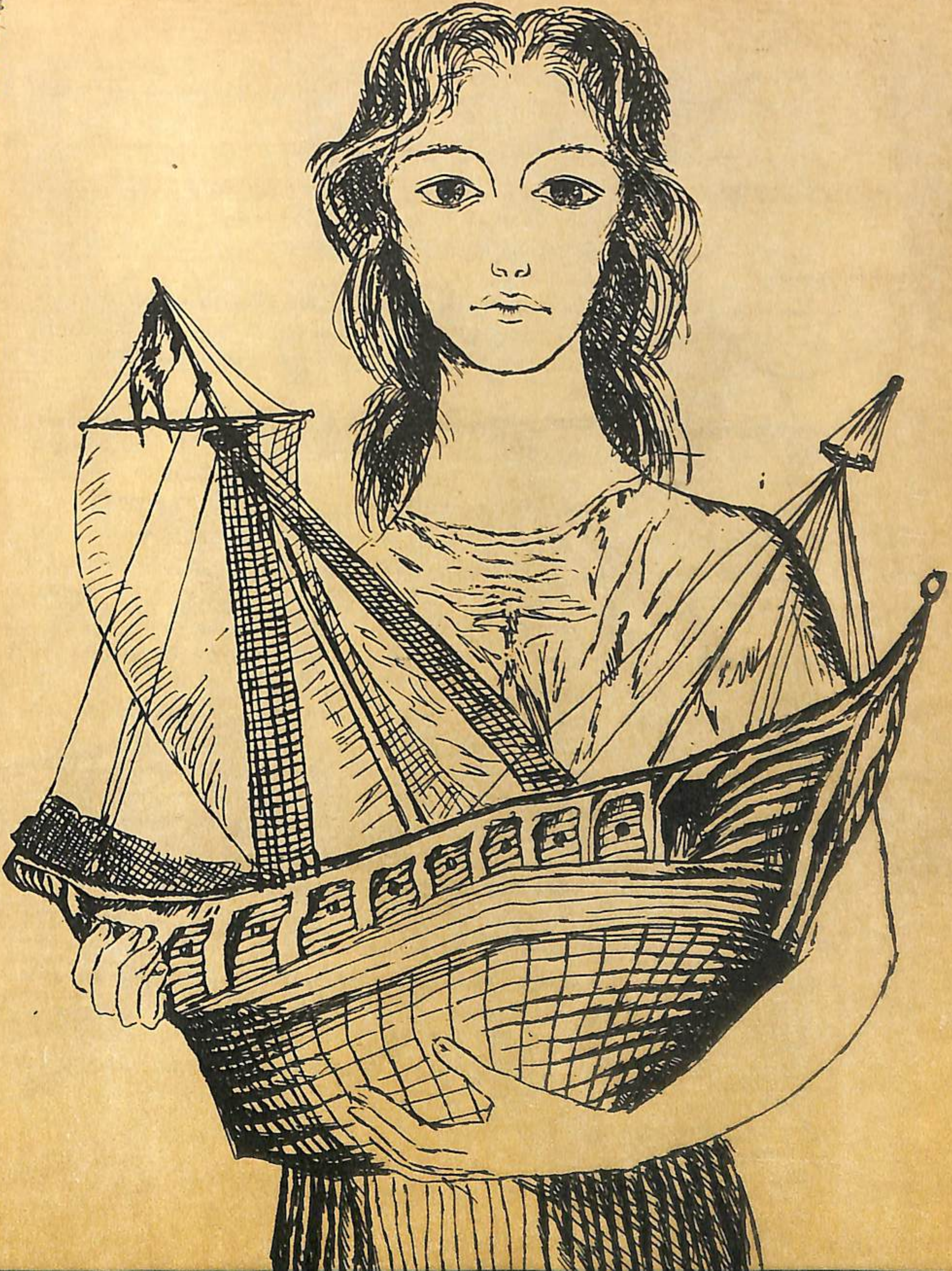
About three months previously the young mother's finances had come to an abrupt end. At least half of the money Longren had left her was spent on doctors after her difficult confinement and on caring for the newborn infant; finally, the loss of a small but vital sum had forced Mary to appeal to Menners for a loan. Menners kept a tavern and shop and was considered a wealthy man.

Mary went to see him at six o'clock in the evening. It was close to









seven when the neighbour woman met her on the road to Liss. Mary had been weeping and was very upset. She said she was going to town to pawn her wedding ring. Then she added that Menners had agreed to lend her some money but had demanded her love in return. Mary had rejected him.

"There's not a crumb in the house," she had said to the neighbour. "I'll go into town. Then we'll manage somehow until my husband returns."

It was a cold, windy evening. In vain did the neighbour try to talk the young woman out of going to Liss when night was approaching. "You'll get wet, Mary. It's beginning to rain, and the wind looks as if it will bring on a storm."

It was at least a three hours' brisk walk from the seaside village to town, but Mary did not heed her neighbour's advice. "I won't be an eyesore to you any more," she said. "As it is, there's hardly a family I haven't borrowed bread, tea or flour from. I'll pawn my ring, and that will take care of everything." She went into town, returned and the following day took to her bed with a fever and chills; the rain and the evening frost had brought on double pneumonia, as the doctor from town, called in by the kind-hearted neighbour, had said. A week later there was an empty place in Longren's double bed, and the neighbour woman moved into his house to care for his daughter. She was a widow and all alone in the world, so this was not a difficult task. "Besides," she added, "the baby fills my days."

Longren went off to town, quit his job, said goodbye to his comrades and returned home to raise little Assol. The widow stayed on in the sailor's house as a foster mother to the child until she had learned to walk well, but as soon as Assol stopped falling when she raised her foot to cross the threshold, Longren declared that from then on he intended to care for the child himself and, thanking the woman for her help and kindness, embarked on a lonely widower's life, focusing all his thoughts, hopes, love and memories on the little girl.

Ten years of roaming the seas had not brought him much of a fortune. He began to work. Soon the shops in town were offering his toys for sale, finely-crafted small model boats, launches, one- and two-deck sailing vessels, cruisers and steamboats; in a word, all that

he knew so well and that, owing to the nature of the toys, partially made up for the hustle and bustle of the ports and the adventures of a life at sea. In this way Longren earned enough to keep them comfortable. He was not a sociable man, but now, after his wife's death, he became something of a recluse. He was sometimes seen in a tavern of a holiday, but he would never join anyone and would down a glass of vodka at the bar and leave with a brief: "yes", "no", "hello", "goodbye", "getting along", in reply to all his neighbours' questions and greetings. He could not stand visitors and would get rid of them without resorting to force, yet firmly, by hints and excuses which left the former no choice but to invent a reason that prevented them from remaining further.

He, in turn, visited no one; thus, a wall of cold estrangement rose up between him and his fellow-villagers, and if Longren's work, the toys he made, had depended in any way on village affairs, he would have felt most keenly the consequences of this relationship. He bought all his wares and provisions in town, and Menners could not even boast of a box of matches he had sold to Longren. Longren did all his own housework and patiently learned the difficult art, so unusual for a man, of rearing a girl.

Assol was now five, and her father was beginning to smile ever more gently as he looked upon her sensitive, kind little face when she sat in his lap and puzzled over the mystery of his buttoned waistcoat or sang sailors' chants, those wild, wind-blown rhymes. When sung by a child, with a lisp here and there, the chants made one think of a dancing bear with a pale blue ribbon around its neck. At about this time something occurred that, casting its shadow upon the father, shrouded the daughter as well.

It was spring, an early spring as harsh as winter, but still unlike it. A biting North off-shore wind whipped across the cold earth for about three weeks.

The fishing boats, dragged up onto the beach, formed a long row of dark keels which seemed like the backbones of some monstrous fish on the white sand. No one dared to venture out to sea in such weather. The single village street was deserted; the cold whirlwind, racing down from the hills along the shore and off towards the vacant horizon, made the "open air" a terrible torture. All the chimneys of

Kaperna smoked from dawn till dusk, shaking the smoke out over the steep roofs.

However, the days of the fierce North wind enticed Longren out of his cozy little house more often than did the sun, which cast its coverlets of spun gold over the sea and Kaperna on a clear day. Longren would go to the very end of the long wooden pier and there he would smoke his pipe at length, the wind carrying off the smoke, and watch the sandy bottom, bared near the shore when the waves retreated, foam up in grey froth that barely caught up with the waves whose rumbling progress towards the black, stormy horizon filled the space between with flocks of weird, long-maned creatures galloping off in wild abandon to their distant point of solace. The moaning and the noise, the crashing thunder of the huge, upthrusted masses of water and the seemingly visible currents of wind that whipped across the vicinity—for so forceful was its unhampered course—produced that dulling, deafening sensation in Longren's tortured soul which, reducing grief to undefinable sadness, is equal in its effect to deep slumber.

On one such day Menners' twelve-year-old son Hin, noticing that his father's boat was being buffeted against the piles under the pier and that its sides were becoming battered, went off to tell his father of this. The storm had but recently begun; Menners had forgotten to pull his boat up on the sand. He hurried to the beach where he saw Longren standing at the end of the pier with his back to him, smoking. There was not another soul in sight. Menners walked halfway along the pier, climbed down into the wildly splashing water and untied his boat; then, standing upright in it, he began moving towards the shore, pulling himself along from one pile to the next. He had forgotten his oars, and as he stumbled and missed his hold on the next pile, a strong gust of wind pulled the prow of his boat away from the pier and towards the ocean. Now Menners could not have reached the nearest pile even if he had stretched out to his full length. The wind and the waves, rocking the boat, were carrying it off into the distance and doom. Menners realized his predicament and wanted to dive into the water and swim ashore, but this decision was too late in coming, for the boat was now spinning about near the end of the pier where the considerable depth and raging waves promised imminent death. There were only about twenty metres between Longren and Menners, who

was being swept off into the stormy distance, and a rescue was still possible, for a coiled rope with a weighted end hung on the pier beside Longren. The rope was there for any boat that might land during a storm and was thrown to the boat from the pier.

"Longren!" Menners cried in terror. "Don't just stand there! Can't you see I'm being carried away? Throw me the line!"

Longren said nothing as he gazed calmly upon the frantic man, although he puffed harder on his pipe and then, to have a better view of what was happening, removed it from his mouth.

"Longren!" Menners pleaded. "I know you can hear me. I'll be drowned! Save me!"

But Longren said not a word; it seemed as though he had not heard the frantic wail. He did not even shift his weight until the boat had been carried so far out to sea that Menners' word-cries were barely audible.

Menners sobbed in terror, he begged the sailor to run to the fishermen for help; he promised him a reward, he threatened and cursed him, but all Longren did was walk to the very edge of the pier so as not to loose the leaping, spinning boat from view too soon.

"Longren, save me!" The words came to him as they would to someone inside a house from someone on the roof.

Then, filling his lungs with air and taking a deep breath so that not a single word would be carried away by the wind, Longren shouted: "That's how she pleaded with you! Think of it, Menners, while you're still alive, and don't forget!"

Then the cries stopped, and Longren went home. Assol awakened to see her father sitting lost in thought before the lamp that was now burning low. Hearing the child's voice calling to him, he went over to her, kissed her affectionately and fixed the tumbled blanket.

"Go to sleep, dear. It's still a long way till morning," he said.

"What are you doing?"

"I've made a black toy, Assol. Now go to sleep."

The next day the village buzzed with the news of Menners' disappearance. Five days later he was brought back, dying and full of malice. His story soon reached every village in the vicinity. Menners had been in the open sea until evening; he had been battered against

the sides and bottom of the boat during his terrible battle with the crashing waves that constantly threatened to toss the raving shopkeeper into the sea and was picked up by the *Lucretia,* plying towards Kasset. Exposure and the nightmare he had experienced put an end to Menners' days. He did not live a full forty-eight hours, calling down upon Longren every calamity possible on earth and in his imagination. Menners' story of the sailor watching his doom, having refused him help, the more convincing since the dying man could barely breathe and kept moaning, astounded the people of Kaperna. To say nothing of the fact that hardly a one of them would remember an insult even greater than the one inflicted upon Longren or to grieve as he was to grieve for Mary till the end of his days—they were repulsed, puzzled and stunned by Longren's *silence.* Longren had *stood* there *in silence* until those last words he had shouted to Menners; he had *stood* there without moving, sternly and silently, as a *judge,* expressing his utter contempt of Menners—there was something greater than hatred in his silence and they all sensed this. If he had shouted, expressed his gloating through gesture or bustling action, or had in any other way shown his triumph at the sight of Menners' despair, the fishermen would have understood him, but he had acted differently than they would have—he had acted *impressively and strangely* and had thus placed himself above them—in a word, he had done that which is not forgiven. No longer did anyone salute him in the street or offer him his hand, or cast a friendly glance of recognition and greeting his way. From now and to the end he was to remain aloof from the affairs of the village; boys catching sight of him in the street would shout after him: "Longren drowned Menners!" He paid no attention to this. Nor did it seem that he noticed the fact that in the tavern or on the beach among the boats the fishermen would stop talking in his presence and would move away as from someone who had the plague. The Menners' affair had served to strengthen their formerly partial alienation. Becoming complete, it created an unshakeable mutual hatred, the shadow of which fell upon Assol as well.

The little girl grew up without friends. The two or three dozen children of her age in the village, which was saturated like a sponge is with water with the crude law of family rule, the basis of which is the unquestioned authority of the parents, imitative like all children in the

world, excluded little Assol once and for all from the circle of their protection and interest. Naturally, this came about gradually, through the admonitions and scolding of the adults, and assumed the nature of a terrible taboo which, increased by idle talk and rumour, burgeoned in the children's minds to become a fear of the sailor's house.

Besides, the secluded life Longren led now gave vent to the hysterical tongues of gossip; it was implied that the sailor had murdered someone somewhere and that, they said, was why he was no longer signed up on any ship, and he was so sullen and unsociable because he was "tormented by a criminal conscience". When playing, the children would chase Assol away if she came near, they would sling mud at her and taunt her by saying that her father ate human flesh and was now a counterfeiter. One after another her naive attempts at making friends ended in bitter tears, bruises, scratches and other manifestations of *public opinion*; she finally stopped feeling affronted, but would still sometimes ask her father:

"Why don't they like us? Tell me."

"Ah, Assol, they don't know how to like or love. One must be able to love, and that is something they cannot do."

"What do you mean by 'be able to'?"

"This!"

At which he would swing the child up and fondly kiss her sad eyes which she would shut tight with sweet pleasure.

Assol's favourite pastime was to climb up on her father's lap of an evening or on a holiday, when he had set aside his pots of glue, his tools and unfinished work and, having taken off his apron, sat down to rest, pipe clenched between his teeth. Twisting and turning within the protective circle of her father's arm, she would finger the various parts of the toys, questioning him as to the purpose of each. Thus would begin a peculiar, fantastic lecture on life and people—a lecture in which, due to Longren's former way of life, all sorts of chance occurrences and chance in general, strange, amazing and unusual events, were given a major role. As Longren told his daughter the names of the various ropes, sails and rigging, he would gradually become carried away, progressing from simple explanations to various episodes in which now a windlass, now a rudder and now a mast, or this or the other type of craft and such like had played a part, and from

these isolated illustrations he would go on to sweeping descriptions of nautical wanderings, interweaving superstition with reality and reality with images created by his imagination. Herein appeared the *tiger cat,* that herald of shipwreck, the talking flying fish which one had to obey on pain of losing one's course, and the Flying Dutchman and his wild crew, signs, ghosts, mermaids and pirates—in a word, all the fables that help a sailor while away the time during a calm spell or in some favourite tavern. Longren also spoke of shipwrecked crews, of men who had become savages and had forgotten how to talk, of mysterious buried treasure, of convict mutinies, and of much else which the little girl listened to more raptly than did, perhaps, Columbus' first audience to his tale of a new continent. "Tell me more," Assol pleaded when Longren, lost in thought, would fall silent, and she would fall asleep on his breast with a head full of wonderful dreams.

The appearance of the clerk from the toy shop in town, which was glad to buy whatever Longren had made, was a great and always a materially important treat to her. In order to get into the father's good graces and strike a good bargain, the clerk would bring along a couple of apples, a bun and a handfull of nuts for the girl. Longren usually asked for the true price of a toy, for he detested bargaining, but the clerk would lower the price. "Why," Longren would say, "it's taken me a week to make this boat. (The boat was nine inches long.) See how strong and trim it is, and mark the draught. Why, it'll hold fifteen men in a storm." In the end, the little girl's soft murmurings and fussing with her apple would weaken Longren's determination and desire to argue; he would give in, and the clerk, having filled his basket with well-made, excellent toys, would leave, laughing up his sleeve.

Longren did all the work about the house himself: he chopped wood, carried water, made the stove, cooked, washed clothes and ironed and, besides, found time to earn their keep. When Assol was eight years old her father taught her to read and write. He began taking her to town now and then, and after a while even sent her alone if he had to borrow some money from the shop or had some new toys to deliver. This did not happen often, although Liss was only four miles from Kaperna, but the road lay through the forest, and there is

much in a forest that can frighten a child beside the actual physical danger which, it is true, one would hardly find in such close proximity to a town, but should still keep in mind. That was why Longren would let her go to town alone only on fine days, in the morning, when the woods along the road were filled with showers of sunshine, flowers and stillness, so that Assol's impressionability was not threatened by any phantoms conjured up by her imagination.

One day, in the middle of such a journey to town, the child sat down by the roadside to have a bun she had brought along for her lunch. As she munched on the bun she picked up each toy in turn; two or three were new to her: Longren had made them during the night. One of the new toys was a miniature racing yacht; the little white craft had crimson sails made of scraps of silk which Longren used to cover the cabin walls in toys intended for wealthy customers. Here, however, having completed the yacht, he had not found any suitable cloth for the sails and had used what had come to hand—some scraps of crimson silk. Assol was delighted. The flaming, cheerful colour burned so brightly in her hand she fancied she was holding fire. A stream straddled by a little bridge of nailed poles crossed the road; to the right and left the stream flowed off into the forest. "If I put it in the water for just a little while it won't get wet," Assol was thinking, "and then I can wipe it dry." She went off downstream into the forest a ways, and carefully placed the boat that had caught her fancy into the stream at the water's edge; the clear water immediately reflected the crimson of the sails; the light streaming through the cloth lay as a shimmering pink glow upon the white stones of the bottom. "Where'd you come from, Captain?" Assol inquired in a most serious voice of an imaginary character and, answering her own question, replied, "I've come from ... from ... from China." "And what have you brought?" "That's something I shan't tell you." "Oh, so you won't, Captain? Well then, back into the basket you go." Just as the captain was about to repent and say he had only been teasing, and would gladly show her an elephant, the mild backlash of a wave that had washed against the bank turned the yacht's bow into the stream and, like a real vessel, it left the bank at full speed and sailed off with the current. The scale of her surroundings changed instantly: the stream now seemed like a great river to the child, and the yacht a

large, distant vessel towards which, nearly falling into the water, she stretched forth her hands in dumb terror. "The captain got frightened," she decided and ran after the disappearing toy, hoping that it would be washed up on the bank farther on. As she hastened along, dragging the light but cumbersome basket, Assol kept repeating, "Goodness! How could it have happened? What an accident..." Trying not to lose sight of the beautiful triangle of the sails that was drifting off so gracefully, she stumbled, fell, and ran on again.

Never before had Assol ventured so far into the woods. Being completely absorbed by an impatient desire to catch up with the toy, she paid no attention to her surroundings; there were more than enough obstacles on the bank to claim her attention as she scurried along. Mossy trunks of fallen trees, pits, tall-standing ferns, briar roses, jasmine and hazel bushes blocked her every step; in overcoming them she gradually tired, stopping ever more often to catch her breath or brush a wisp of clinging cobweb from her face. When, in the wider stretches, there appeared thickets of sedge and reeds, Assol nearly lost sight of the crimson-gleaming sails, but hurrying round a bend she would catch sight of them again, running with the wind so majestically and steadfastly. Once she looked back, and the great mass of the forest with its many hues, changing from the hazy columns of light in the leaves to the dark slashes of dense gloom, astounded her. For a moment she became frightened, but then recalled the toy and, letting out several deep "phew's", ran on as fast as she could.

Nearly an hour passed in this futile and frantic chase, and then Assol was surprised and relieved to see the trees part widely up ahead, letting in a blue expanse of sea, clouds and the edge of a sandy yellow bluff onto which she came running, nearly dropping from exhaustion. This was the mouth of the little river; spreading here, not broadly, and shallowly, so that the streaming blue of the rocks on the bottom could be seen, it disappeared into the oncoming waves of the sea. Standing at the edge of the low, root-gnarled bluff, Assol saw a man sitting on a large, flat stone by the stream with his back to her, holding the runaway yacht and turning it in his hands with the curiosity of an elephant that had caught a butterfly. Somewhat calmed by the sight of the rescued toy, Assol slid down the slope, came up beside the stranger, and studied him closely while waiting for him to raise his head.

However, the stranger was so absorbed in examining the forest's surprise that the child had a chance to inspect him from head to toe, deciding that never before had she ever seen anyone like him.

The man was in fact Egle, the well-known collector of songs, legends and fairy-tales, who was on a walking tour. His grey locks fell in waves from under his straw hat; his grey blouse tucked into his blue trousers and his high boots made him look like a hunter; his white collar, tie, silver-studded belt, walking stick and leather pouch with the shiny, nickel-plated buckle showed him to be a city-dweller. His face, if one can call a face a nose, lips and eyes that peep out of a bushy, spiked beard and luxuriant, fiercely twirled moustache, would have seemed flabbily translucent, if not for the eyes that were as grey as sand and as shiny as pure steel, with a gaze that was bold and powerful.

"Now give it back," the little girl said timidly. "You've played with it long enough. How did you catch it?"

Egle looked up and dropped the yacht, for Assol's excited voice had broken the stillness so unexpectedly. For a moment the old man gazed at her, smiling and slowly running his beard through his large, curled hand. An oft-washed little cotton dress just barely covered the girl's skinny, sunburned knees. Her thick dark hair tied up in a lace kerchief had got undone and fell to her shoulders. Every one of Assol's features was finely-chiselled and as delicate as a swallow's flight. There was a sad, questioning look in her dark eyes which seemed older than her face; its irregular oval was touched with the lovely sunburn peculiar to a healthy whiteness of the skin. Her small parted lips were turned up in a gentle smile.

"I swear by the Brothers Grimm, Aesop and Andersen," Egle said, looking from the girl to the yacht, "that there's something very special here! Listen, you, flower! This is yours, isn't it?"

"Yes. I ran all the way down along the stream after it; I thought I'd die. Did it come here?"

"Right to my feet. The shipwreck has made it possible for me, acting as an off-shore pirate, to present you with this prize. The yacht, abandoned by its crew, was tossed up on the beach by a three-inch wave—landing between my left heel and the tip of my stick." He thumped his stick. "What's your name, child?"

"Assol," the girl replied, tucking the toy Egle had handed her into the basket.

"That's fine." The old man continued his obscure speech, never taking his eyes, in the depths of which a kindly friendly chuckle glinted, from her. "Actually, I shouldn't have asked you your name. I'm glad it's such an unusual one, so sibilant and musical, like the whistle of an arrow or the whispering of a seashell; what would I have done if your name had been one of those pleasant but terribly common names which are so alien to Glorious Uncertainty? Still less do I care to know who you are, who your parents are, or what sort of life you lead. Why break the spell? I was sitting here on this stone comparing Finnish and Japanese story plots ... when suddenly the stream washed up this yacht, and then you appeared. Just as you are. I'm a poet at heart, my dear, even though I've never written anything. What's in your basket?"

"Boats," Assol said, shaking the basket, "and a steamship, and three little houses with flags. Soldiers live in them."

"Excellent. You've been sent to sell them. And on the way you stopped to play. You let the yacht sail about a bit, but it ran off instead. Am I right?"

"Were you watching?" Assol asked doubtfully as she tried to recall whether she had not told him about it herself. "Did somebody tell you? Or did you guess?"

"I knew it."

"How?"

"Because I'm the greatest of all magicians."

Assol was embarrassed; the tension she felt at these words of Egle's overstepped fear. The deserted beach, the stillness, the tiring adventure of the yacht, the strange speech of the old man with the glittering eyes, the magnificence of his beard and hair now seemed to the child as a brew of the supernatural and reality. If Egle had grimaced or shouted now, the child would have raced off, weeping and faint from fear. However, upon noticing how wide her eyes had grown, Egle made a sharp turn.

"You've no reason to be afraid of me," he said in a serious voice. "On the contrary, I want to have a heart-to-heart talk with you."

Now at last did he see what it was in her face that had struck him

so. "An unwitting expectation of the beautiful, of a blissful fate," he decided. "Ah, why wasn't I born a writer? What a wonderful theme for a story."

"Now then," Egle continued, trying to round off his original thesis (a penchant for myth-making—the result of his everyday work—was greater than the fear of tossing seeds of great dreams upon unknown soil), "now then, Assol, listen carefully. I've just been in the village you are probably coming from; in a word, in Kaperna. I like fairy-tales and songs, and I spent the whole day in that village hoping to hear something no one had heard before. But no one in these parts tells fairy-tales. No one here sings songs. And if they do tell stories and sing songs, you know, they are tales about conniving peasants and soldiers, with the eternal praise of roguery, they are as filthy as unwashed feet and as crude as a rumbling stomach, these short, four-line ditties sung to a terrible tune... Wait, I've got carried away. I'll start again."

He was silent for a while and then continued thus:

"I don't know how many years will pass, but a fairy-tale will blossom in Kaperna and will remain in the minds of the people for long. You'll be grown-up then, Assol. One morning a crimson sail will gleam in the sun on the far horizon. The shimmering pile of crimson sails on a white ship will head straight towards you, cutting through the waves. This wonderful ship will sail in silently; there will be no shouting or salvoes; a great crowd will gather on the beach. Everyone will be amazed and astounded; and you'll be there, too. The ship will sail majestically up to the very shore to the strains of beautiful music; a swift boat decked out in rugs, flowers and gold will be lowered from the ship. 'Why have you come? Whom are you searching for?' the people on the beach will say. Then you'll see a brave and handsome prince; he'll be standing there and stretching forth his hands towards you. 'Hello, Assol!' he'll say. 'Far, far away from here I saw you in a dream and have come to take you away to my kingdom forever. You will live with me there in a deep rose valley. You shall have everything your heart desires; we shall be so happy together your soul will never know the meaning of tears or sadness.' He'll take you into his boat, bring you to the ship, and you'll sail away forever to a glorious land where the sun comes up and where the stars will descend

from the sky to greet you upon your arrival."

"And will it all be for me?" the girl asked softly. Her grave eyes became merry and shone trustingly. Obviously, no dangerous magician would ever speak thus; she came closer.

"Maybe it's already come ... that ship?"

"Not so fast," Egle objected. "First, as I've said, you have to grow up. Then ... what's the use of talking? It *will be*, and that's all there is to it. What will you do then?"

"Me?" She looked into the basket but apparently did not find anything there worthy of being a suitable reward. "I'd love him," she said quickly and then added rather hesitantly, "if he won't fight."

"No, he won't," the magician said, winking at her mysteriously. "He won't. I can vouch for it. Go, child, and don't forget what I've told you between two sips of flavoured vodka and my musings over the songs of convicts. Go. And may there be peace for your fluffy head!"

Longren was working in his small garden, hilling the potato plants. Raising his head, he saw Assol, who was running towards him with a joyous, impatient look on her face.

"Listen..." she said, trying to control her rapid breathing and clutching her father's apron with both hands. "Listen to what I'm going to tell you... On the beach there, far away, there's a magician..."

She began her tale by telling him of the magician and his wonderful prophesy. Her excitement made it hard for her to recount the events coherently. She then proceeded to describe the magician and, in reverse order, her chase after the runaway yacht.

Longren listened to her story without once interrupting and without a smile, and when she ended it his imagination quickly conjured up a picture of the stranger, an old man holding a flask of flavoured vodka in one hand and the toy in the other. He turned away, but recalling that at momentous times of a child's life one had to be serious and amazed, nodded solemnly and uttered:

"I see... It looks like he really is a magician. I'd like to have a look at him... But when you go again, don't turn off the road: it's easy to get lost in the woods."

He laid aside his hoe, sat down by the low wattle fence and took the

child onto his lap. She was terribly tired and tried to add a few more details, but the heat, excitement and exhaustion made her drowsy. Her lids drooped, her head leaned against her father's hard shoulder, and in another instant she would have been carried off to the Land of Nod, when abruptly, perturbed by sudden doubt, Assol sat up straight with her eyes still shut and, thrusting her little fists at Longren's waistcoat, exclaimed:

"Do you think the magical ship will really come for me?"

"It'll come," the sailor replied calmly. "If you've been told it will, it means it will."

"She'll forget all about it by the time she grows up," he said to himself, "and, meanwhile ... one should not take *such* a toy from you. You will see so many sails in the future, and they will not be crimson, but filthy and treacherous: from afar they'll seem gleaming and white, but from close-up they'll be ragged and brazen. A traveller chose to jest with my girl. So what? It was a kindly jest! It was a good jest! My, how tired you are! Half a day spent in the woods, in the heart of the forest. As for the crimson sails, think of them as I do: you will have your crimson sails."

Assol slept. Longren took out his pipe with his free hand, lit it, and the wind carried the smoke off through the fence into a bush that grew outside the garden. Sitting by the bush with his back to the fence and chewing on a slice of meat pie was a young beggar. The overheard conversation between the father and daughter had put him in a cheerful mood, and the smell of good tobacco had awakened the sponger in him.

"Give a poor man a smoke, sir," he said, speaking through the fence. "Compared to yours, my tobacco is pure poison."

"I'd certainly give you some," Longren replied in an undertone, "but my pouch is in my other pocket. And I don't want to waken my daughter."

"What a disaster, indeed! She'll wake up and go right back to sleep again, but you'll have given a wayfarer a smoke."

"It's not as if you were all out of tobacco," Longren retorted, "and the child's exhausted. Come by later, if you wish."

The beggar spat in disgust, hung his sack on his stick and sneered:

"Naturally, she's a princess. Filling her head with all sorts of fairy-

tale ships! You really are a queer fish, and you a man of property!"

"Listen," Longren whispered, "I think I will waken her, but it'll only be because I'll be bashing your face in. Now get going!"

Half an hour later the beggar was seated in a tavern in the company of a dozen fishermen. Sitting behind them, now tugging at a husband's sleeve, now stretching a hand over a shoulder to reach for a glass of vodka—for themselves, naturally—were some buxom women with shaggy brows. The muscles of their arms were as big as paving stones. The beggar, fuming from the affront, was relating his tale:

"...and he wouldn't give me a smoke. 'Now when you get to be of age,' he says, 'a special red ship'll come for you. That's on account of how you're fated to marry a prince. And,' he says, 'you mind what that magician said.' But I say, 'Go on, wake her up, so's you can reach over and get your pouch.' And, you know, he chased me halfway down the road."

"What? Who? What's he talking about?" the women's curious voices demanded.

The fishermen turned their heads slightly to tell them what it was all about, smiling wryly as they did:

"Longren and his daughter have become wild as animals, and maybe they're even touched in the head, that's what the man here's saying. A sorcerer came to see them, he says. And now they're waiting—ladies, see you don't miss your chance!—for a prince from some foreign land, and he'll be sailing under crimson sails to boot!"

Three days later, as Assol was returning home from the toy shop in town, she first heard the taunts:

"Hey, you gallows-bird! Assol! Look over here! See the crimson sails coming in!"

The child started and involuntarily shielded her eyes as she gazed off towards the sea. Then she turned back to where the shouting had come from; twenty feet away she saw a group of children; they were making faces and sticking their tongues out at her. The little girl sighed and hurried off home.

II

GRAY

If Caesar considered that it was better to be the first in a village than the second in Rome, Arthur Gray did not have to envy Caesar as far as his sagacious wish was concerned. He was born a captain, desired to be one, and became one.

The great manor in which Gray was born was sombre inside and magnificent without. The manor looked on flower gardens and a part of the park. The very best imaginable tulips—silver-blue, lavender and black with a brush of pink—snaked through the garden like strings of carelessly-strewn beads. The old trees in the park slumbered in the sifting gloom above the sedge of a meandering stream. The castle fence, for the manor was actually a castle, was made of spiral cast-iron posts connected by iron grillwork. Each post was crowned by a cast-iron lily blossom; on festive occasions the cups were filled with oil and burned brightly into the night as a far-stretching, fiery line.

Gray's parents were arrogant slaves of their social position, wealth and the laws of that society, referring to which they could say "we". The part of their souls that was centred on the gallery of their ancestors is not really worth describing, while the other part—an imaginary continuation of the gallery—began with little Gray, who was preordained to live out his life and die in such a manner as to have his portrait hung on the wall without detriment to the family honour. A small error had crept into the plan, however: Arthur Gray was born with a lively spirit, and was in no way disposed to continue the line of the family tracing.

This liveliness, this complete unorthodoxy in the boy became most evident in his eighth year; a knightly type affected by strange impressions, a seeker and miracle worker, that is, a person who had chosen from amongst the countless roles in life the most dangerous and touching one—the role of Providence, became apparent in Gray from the time he pushed a chair up against the wall to reach a painting of the Crucifixion and removed the nails from Christ's bloody hands, that is, he simply covered them over with blue paint he had stolen from a house painter. Thus altered, he found the painting to be more

bearable. Carried away by this strange occupation, he had begun covering over Christ's feet as well, but was surprised by his father. The old man jerked the boy off the chair by his ears and asked:

"Why have you ruined the painting?"

"I haven't ruined it."

"It is the work of a famous painter."

"I don't care. I can't allow nails to be sticking out of someone's hands, making them bleed. I don't want it to be."

Hiding his smile in his moustache, Lionel Gray recognized himself in his son's reply and did not punish him.

Gray diligently went about studying the castle, and his discoveries were amazing. Thus, in the attic he came upon a knight's steel armour-junk, books bound in iron and leather, crumbling vestments and flocks of pigeons. In the cellar, where the wine was kept, he gleaned interesting information about Laffitte, Madeira and sherry. Here in the murky light of the lancet windows that were squeezed in between the slanting triangles of the stone vaults there were large and small casks; the largest, in the shape of a flat circle, took up all of the shorter wall of the cellar; the hundred-year-old black oak of the cask gleamed like highly-polished wood. Paunchy green and dark-blue bottles rested in wicker baskets among the casks. Grey fungi on spindly stalks grew on the stones and on the earthen floor; everywhere there was mould, moss, dampness and a sour, stuffy smell. A great cobweb glittered like gold in a far corner when, towards evening, the sun's last ray searched it out. Two casks of the finest Alicant that existed in the days of Cromwell were sunk into the ground in one spot, and the cellar-keeper, pointing out a vacant corner to Gray, did not miss the chance to recount the story of the famous grave in which lay a dead man more live than a pack of fox terriers. As he began his tale, the storyteller would never forget to check on the spigot of the large cask and would walk away from it apparently with an easier heart, since unwonted tears of too-strong joy glistened in his suddenly merry eyes.

"Now then," Poldichoque would say to Gray, sitting down on an empty crate and putting a pinch of snuff up his sharp nose, "do you see that spot? The kind of wine that's buried there would make many a drunkard agree to having his tongue cut off if he'd be given just a

little glass of it. Each cask holds a hundred litres of a substance that makes your soul explode and your body turn into a blob of dough. It's darker than a cherry, and it won't pour out of a bottle. It's as thick as heavy cream. It's locked away in casks of black oak that're as strong as iron. They have double rows of copper hoops. And the lettering on the hoops is in Latin and says, 'A Gray will drink me when he's in Heaven.' There were so many opinions as to what it means that your greatgrandfather, Simeon Gray, had a country estate built and named it 'Heaven' and thought in that way he could reconcile the mysterious inscription and reality by means of some harmless wit. And what do you know? He died of a heart attack as soon as the first hoops were knocked off. That's how excited the old gourmet was. Ever since then nobody's as much as touched the cask. They say the precious wine will bring misfortune. Indeed, not even the Egyptian Sphinx asked such riddles. True, it did ask a sage: 'Will I devour you like I devour everyone else? Tell me the truth, and you'll live', but only after giving it some concerted thought..."

"I think the spigot's leaking again," Poldichoque would say, interrupting himself, and would head at a slant towards the corner from whence, having tightened the spigot, he would return with a bland, beaming face. "Yes. After giving it some thought and, most important, taking his time about it, the sage might have said to the Sphinx: 'Let's go and have a drink, my good fellow, and you'll forget all about such nonsense.' 'A Gray will drink me when he's in Heaven!' How's one to understand that? Does it mean he'll drink it after he's dead? That's very strange. Which means he's a saint, which means he doesn't drink either wine or spirits. Let's say that 'Heaven' means happiness. But if the question is posed like that, any joy will lose half of its shiny feathers when the happy fellow has to ask himself sincerely: is this Heaven? That's the rub. In order to drink from this cask with an easy heart and laugh, my boy, really laugh, one has to have one foot on the ground and the other in the sky. There's also a third theory: that one day a Gray will get heavenly drunk and will brazenly empty the little cask. However, this, my boy, would not be carrying out the prophesy, it would be a tavern row."

Having checked once again on the working order of the spigot in the big cask, Poldichoque ended his story looking glum and intent:

"Your ancestor, John Gray, brought these casks over from Lisbon on the *Beagle* in 1793; he paid two thousand gold piasters for the wine. The gunsmith Benjamin Ellian from Pondisherry did the inscription on the casks. The casks are sunk six feet underground and covered with the ashes of grape vines. No one ever drank this wine, tasted it, or ever will."

"I'll drink it," Gray said one day, stamping his foot.

"What a brave young man!" Poldichoque said. "And will you drink it in Heaven?"

"Of course! Here's Heaven! It's here, see?" Gray laughed softly and opened his small fist. His delicate but well-formed palm was lit up by the sun, and then the boy curled his fingers into a fist again. "Here it is! It's here, and now it's gone again!"

As he spoke he kept clenching and unclenching his fist. At last, pleased with his joke, he ran out, ahead of Poldichoque, onto the dark stairway leading to the ground floor corridor.

Gray was absolutely forbidden to enter the kitchen, but once, having discovered this wonderful world of flaming hearths and soot, this hissing and bubbling of boiling liquids, chopping of knives and mouth-watering smells, the boy became a diligent visitor to the great chamber. The chefs moved in stony silence like some high priests; their white hats etched against the soot-blackened walls lent an air of solemn ritual to their movements; the fat, jovial dishwashers at their barrels of water scrubbed the tableware, making the china and silver ring; boys came in, bent under the weight of baskets of fish, oysters, lobsters and fruit. Laid out on a long table were rainbow-hued pheasants, grey ducks and brightly-feathered chickens; farther on was the carcass of a suckling pig with a tiny tail and eyes shut like a babe's; then there were turnips, cabbages, nuts, raisin and sun-burnished peaches.

Gray always quailed slightly in the kitchen: he felt that some strange force was in charge here, and that its power was the mainspring of life in the castle; the shouts sounded like orders and invocations; the movements of the kitchen staff after years of practice had acquired that precise, measured rhythm that seems like inspiration. Gray was not yet tall enough to peep into the largest cauldron which bubbled like Mt. Vesuvius, but he felt a special respect for it; he

watched in awe as two serving women handled it; at such times steaming froth would splash out onto the top of the stove, and the steam that rose from the hissing stove lid would billow out into the kitchen. On one occasion so much liquid splashed out it scalded one of the kitchen maid's hands. The skin immediately turned red from the rush of blood, and Betsy (for that was her name) wept as she rubbed oil into the burned skin. Tears coursed down her round, frightened face uncontrollably.

Gray was petrified. As the other women fussed about Betsy, he was suddenly gripped by the pain of another person's suffering which he could not himself experience.

"Does it hurt very much?" he asked.

"Try it, and you'll see," Betsy replied, covering her hand with her apron.

The boy frowned and climbed up onto a stool, dipped a long-handled spoon into the hot liquid (in this case it was lamb soup) and splashed some onto his wrist. The sensation was not faint, but the faintness resulting from the sharp pain made him sway. He was as pale as flour when he went up to Betsy, hiding his scalded hand in his pants pocket.

"I think it hurts you awfully," he murmured, saying nothing of his own experiment. "Come to the doctor, Betsy. Come on!"

He tugged at her skirt insistently, though all the while the believers in home remedies were giving the girl all sorts of advice for treating the burn. However, she was in very great pain, and so she followed Gray. The doctor relieved her pain by applying some medication. Not before Betsy was gone did Gray show him his own hand.

This insignificant episode made twenty-year-old Betsy and ten-year-old Gray bosom friends. She would fill his pockets with sweets and apples, and he would tell her fairy-tales and other stories he had read in his books. One day he discovered that Betsy could not marry Jim, the groom, because they had no money to set themselves up in a home of their own. Gray used the fireplace tongs to crack his china piggy-bank and shook out the contents, which amounted to nearly a hundred pounds. He rose early, and when the dowerless girl went off to the kitchen, sneaked into her room and placed his gift in her chest, laying a note on top: "This is yours, Betsy. (Signed), Robin Hood."

The commotion this caused in the kitchen was so great that Gray had to confess to the deed. He did not take the money back and did not want to have another word said about it.

His mother was one of those people whom life pours into a ready mould. She lived in the dream-world of prosperity that provided for every wish of an ordinary soul; therefore, she had no other occupation save to confer with her dressmakers, doctor and butler. However, her passionate and all but religious attachment for her strange child was, one might assume, the only vent for those of her inclinations, chloroformed by her upbringing and fate, which were no longer fully alive, but simmered faintly, leaving the will idle. The high-born dame resembled a peacock hen that had hatched a swan's egg. She was quiveringly aware of the magnificent uniqueness of her son; sadness, love and constraint filled her being when she pressed the boy to her breast, and her heart spoke unlike her tongue, which habitually reflected the conventional types of relationships and ideas. Thus does a cloud effect, concocted so weirdly by the sun's rays, penetrate the symmetrical interior of a public building, divesting it of its banal merits; the eye sees but does not recognize the chamber; the mysterious nuances of light amongst paltriness create a dazzling harmony.

The high-born dame, whose face and figure, it seemed, could respond but in icy silence to the fiery voices of life and whose delicate beauty repelled rather than attracted, since one sensed her haughty effort of will, devoid of feminine attraction—this same Lillian Gray, when alone with the boy, was transformed into an ordinary mother speaking in a loving, gentle voice those endearments which refuse to be committed to paper; their power lies in the emotions, not in their meaning. She was positively unable to refuse her son anything. She forgave him everything: his visits to the kitchen, his abhorrence of his lessons, his disobedience and his many eccentricities.

If he did not want the trees to be trimmed they were left untouched; if he asked that someone be pardoned or rewarded—the person in question knew that it would be so; he could ride any horse he wished, bring any dog he wished into the castle, go through the books in the library, run around barefoot and eat whatever he pleased.

His father tried to put a stop to this and finally yielded—not to the

principle, but to his wife's wishes. He merely had all the servants' children moved out of the castle, fearing that by associating with *low* society the boy's whims would become inclinations that would be difficult to eradicate. In general, he was completely taken up with endless family lawsuits whose origins went back to the era of the founding of the first paper mills and whose end perhaps lay in the death of the last caviller. Besides, there were affairs of state, the running of his own estates, dictating his memoires, fox-hunts, newspapers to be read and an extended correspondence to keep him at a certain distance inwardly from the rest of the family; he saw his son so infrequently that he would sometimes forget how old the boy was.

Thus, Gray lived in a world of *his own.* He played all by himself—usually in the back yards of the castle which had once, in times of yore, been of strategic use. These vast, empty lots with the remains of deep moats and moss-covered stone cellars were overgrown with weeds, nettles, briars, blackthorn and shy bright wildflowers. Gray would spend hours here, exploring mole burrows, battling weeds, stalking butterflies and building fortresses of broken bricks, which he then shelled with sticks and stones.

He was going on twelve when all the implications of his soul, all the separate traits of his spirit and shades of secret impulses were brought together in a single powerful surge and, having in this way acquired a harmonious expression, became an indomitable desire. Until then he seemed to have found but disparate parts of *his* garden—a sunny spot, shadow, a flower, a great dark trunk—in the many *other* gardens and suddenly saw them clearly, all—in magnificent, astonishing accord.

This happened in the library. The tall door topped by a murky fanlight was usually locked, but the latch fit the mortise loosely and when pressed hard, the door would give, buckle and open. When the spirit of adventure urged Gray to make his way into the library he was amazed at the dusty light, whose effect and peculiarity were created by the coloured design of the leaded fanlight. The stillness of desertion lay upon everything here as on water in a pond. Here and there dark rows of bookcases adjoined the windows, blocking them halfway; there were aisles between the bookcases which were piled high with volumes. Here was an open album from which the centre pages had

slipped out; over there were some scrolls tied with gold cord, stacks of sombre-looking books, thick layers of manuscripts, a mound of miniature volumes which cracked like bark if they were opened; here were charts and tables, rows of new editions, maps; a great variety of bindings, coarse, fine, black, mottled, blue, grey, thick, thin, rough and smooth. The bookcases were packed with books. They seemed like walls which had encompassed life itself within their bulk. The glass of the bookcases reflected other bookcases covered with colourless, shimmering spots. On a round table was a huge globe encased by a brass spherical cross formed by the equator and a meridian.

Turning to the exit, Gray saw a huge painting above the door whose images immediately filled the rigid silence of the library. The painting was of a clipper rising upon the crest of a tremendous wave. Foam coursed down its side. It was depicted at the very last moment of its upward flight. The ship was sailing straight at the viewer. The rearing bowsprit obscured the base of the masts. The crest of the great wave, rent by the keel, resembled the wings of a huge bird. Foam streaked off into the air. The sails, but vaguely discernible behind the forecastle deck and above the bowsprit, swollen by the raging force of the storm, were bearing back in their enormity, in order to, having gained the crest, righten themselves and then, tilting over the void, speed the vessel on towards new billows. Low, ragged clouds swirled over the ocean. The dim light struggled vainly against the approaching darkness of night. However, the most striking aspect of the painting was the figure of a man standing on the forecastle deck with his back to the viewer. It fully conveyed the situation and even the nature of the moment. The man's pose (he had spread his legs far apart and flung out his arms) did not actually indicate what he was doing, but led one to assume attention strained to the extreme and directed towards something on deck invisible to the viewer. The hem of his coat was whipped back by the wind; his white pigtail and black sword were swept straight out into the air; the richness of his dress indicated him to be the captain; his dancing stance—the sweep of the wave; there was no hat: he was, apparently, completely absorbed by the dangerous moment and was shouting—but what? Did he see a man falling overboard, was he issuing an order to tack about or, shouting above the wind, was he calling to the boatswain? The shadows of

these thoughts, not the thoughts themselves, took shape in Gray's heart as he gazed at the painting. He suddenly felt that someone had approached him from the left and now stood beside him, unknown and unseen; he had only to turn his head to make the weird sensation disappear without a trace. Gray knew this. However, he did not snuff out his imagination, but harkened to it. A soundless voice shouted several curt phrases, as incomprehensible as if spoken in Malay; there followed the crash of extended avalanches; echoes and a grim wind filled the library. Gray heard all this within himself. He looked around; the stillness that was instantly re-established dispelled the ringing cobweb of his fantasy; his bond with the storm was broken.

Gray returned several times to look at the painting. It became to him that necessary word in the conversation between the soul and life without which it is difficult to understand one's self. The great sea was gradually finding a place within the small boy. He became accustomed to it as he went through the books in the library, seeking out and avidly reading those behind whose golden door the blue glitter of the ocean could be seen. There, sowing spray behind the stern, the ships plied on. Some lost their sails and masts and, becoming engulfed by the waves, settled into the deep, where in the darkness gleam the phosphorescent eyes of fishes. Others, seized by the breakers, were battered against the reefs; the subsiding sweel shook the hull dangerously; the deserted ship with its torn rigging was in protracted agony until a new storm shattered it to bits. Still others took on cargo uneventfully in one port and unloaded it in another; the crew, gathered around a tavern table, would sing the praises of a life at sea and down their drinks lovingly. There were also pirate ships that flew the Jolly Roger, manned by terrible, cutlass-swinging crews; there were phantom ships radiant in a deathly glow of blue illumination; there were naval ships with soldiers, cannons and brass bands; there were the ships of scientific expeditions, studying volcanoes, flora and fauna; there were ships enveloped in grim mystery and mutiny; there were ships of discovery and ships of adventure.

In this world, most naturally, the figure of the captain towered above all else. He was the fate, the soul and the brain of the ship. His character determined the work and the leisure of the crew. He selected his crew himself and it met his inclinations in many ways. He knew

the habits and family life of each man. He possessed, in the eyes of his subordinates, magical knowledge, which enabled him to confidently plot a course from, say, Lisbon to Shanghai across the vast expanses. He repelled a storm by the counteraction of a system of complex efforts, squelching panic with curt orders; he sailed and stopped where he would; he was in command of the sailing and loading, repairs and leisure; it was difficult to imagine a greater and more sensible authority in a vital enterprise full of constant movement. This power, in its exclusiveness, and absoluteness, was equal to the power of Orpheus.

This notion of a captain, this image and this actual reality of his position occupied, by right of events of the spirit, the place of honour in Gray's splendid imagination. No other profession save this could so successfully fuse into a single whole all the treasures of life, while preserving inviolable the most delicate design of each separate joy. Danger, risk, the forces of nature, the light of a distant land, the wondrous unknown, effervescent love, blossoming in rendezvous and parting; the fascinating turmoil of encounters, faces, events; the endless variety of life, while up above in the sky was now the Southern Cross, now the Big Dipper, and all the continents were in one's keen eyes, though your cabin was replete with your ever-present homeland, with its books, pictures, letters and dried flowers entwined by a silken strand of hair in a suede locket on your manly chest.

In the autumn of his fifteenth year Arthur Gray ran away from home and passed through the golden gates of the sea. Soon after the schooner *Anselm* left Dubelt and set sail for Marseilles, with a ship's boy aboard who had small hands and the face of a girl dressed in boy's clothing. The ship's boy was Gray, the owner of an elegant travelling-bag, patent leather boots as fine as kid gloves and batiste linen adorned with a crown crest.

In the course of a year, while the *Anselm* sailed from France to America and Spain, Gray squandered a part of his possessions on pastry-cakes, thus paying tribute to the past, and the rest, for the present and future, he lost at cards. He wanted to be a *red-blooded* sailor. He choked as he downed his liquor, and when bathing, his heart would falter as he dived from a height of twelve feet. He gradually lost everything except that which was most important—his

strange, soaring spirit; he lost his frailty, becoming broad of bone and strong of muscle, his paleness gave way to a deep tan, he relinquished his refined carelessness of movement for the sure drive of a working hand, and there was a sparkle in his intelligent eyes as in a person's who gazes into a fire. And his speech, having lost its uneven, haughtily shy fluidity, became brief and precise, as the thrust of a seagull at the quivering silver of a fish.

The captain of the *Anselm* was a kind man, but a stern seafarer who had taken the boy on out of maliciousness. He saw in Gray's desperate desire but an eccentric whim and gloated in advance, imagining that in two months' time Gray would say, avoiding his eyes: "Captain Hop, I've skinned my elbows climbing the rigging; my back and sides ache, my fingers don't bend, my head is splitting and my legs are shaky. All these wet ropes weighing eighty pounds to balance in my hands; all these manropes, guy ropes, windlasses, cables, topmasts and cross-trees are killing my delicate body. I want to go home to my mamma." After listening mentally to this speech, Captain Hop would deliver, also mentally, the following speech: "You can go wherever you want to, ducky. If any tar's got stuck on your fine feathers you can wash it off at home—with Rose-Mimosa Cologne." This cologne that Captain Hop had invented pleased him most of all and, concluding his imaginary rebuke, he repeated aloud: "Yes. Run along to Rose-Mimosa."

As time went by this impressive dialogue came to the captain's mind less and less frequently, since Gray was advancing towards his goal with clenched teeth and a pale face. He bore the strenuous toil with a determined effort of will, feeling that it was becoming ever easier as the stern ship broke into his body and ineptitude was replaced by habit. On occasion the loop of the anchor chain would knock him off his feet, slamming him against the deck, or a rope that was not wound around the bitts would be torn out of his hands, taking the skin off his palms, or the wind would slap the wet corner of a sail with an iron ring sewn into it against his face; in a word, all his work was torture which demanded the utmost attention, yet, no matter how hard he breathed as he slowly straightened his back, a scornful smile never left his face. In silence did he endure all the scoffing, taunts and inevitable cursing until he became "one of the boys"

in his new surroundings, but from then on he always countered an insult with his fists.

Once, when Captain Hop saw him skilfully tying a sail to a yard, he said to himself: "Victory is on your side, you scoundrel." When Gray climbed down to the deck Hop summoned him to his cabin and, opening a dog-eared book, said:

"Listen closely. Stop smoking! We'll start fitting the pup out to be a captain."

And he began to read or, rather, to enunciate and shout the ancient words of the sea. This was Gray's first lesson. In the course of a year he got to know about navigation, shipbuilding, maritime law, sailing directions and book-keeping. Captain Hop proffered him his hand and referred to the two of them as "we".

His mother's letter, full of tears and dread, caught up with Gray in Vancouver. He replied: "I know. But if you could only *see as I do*: look at things through my eyes. If you could only hear as I do: put a seashell to your ear—it carries the sound of an eternal wave; if you could only love as I do—*everything*, I would have found in your letter, besides love and a cheque, a smile." And he went on sailing until the *Anselm* arrived with a cargo for Dubelt from whence, while the ship was docked, the twenty-year-old Gray set off to visit the castle.

Everything was as it had always been; as inviolable in detail and in general impression as five years before, although the crowns of the young elms were larger; the pattern they made on the façade of the building had moved and expanded.

The servants who came running were overjoyed, startled and froze as respectfully as if they had but yesterday greeted *this* Gray. He was told where his mother was; he entered the high chamber and, drawing the door shut softly, stopped soundlessly, gazing at the woman, now turned grey, in the black dress. She was standing before a crucifix; her fervent whisper was as audible as the pounding of a heart. "And bless those at sea, the wayfarers, the sick, the suffering and the imprisoned," Gray heard the words as he breathed rapidly. There followed: "And my boy..." Then he said: "Here..." But he could say no more. His mother turned. She had become thinner; a new expression lit up the haughtiness of her chiselled face, like the return of youth. She hurried towards her son; a burst of throaty laughter, a

restrained exclamation and tears of her eyes—this was all. But in that moment she lived—more fully and happier than in the whole of her previous life.

"I recognized you instantly, my darling, my baby!"

And Gray indeed ceased being grown-up. He listened to her tale of his father's death and then told her about himself. She heeded him without reproach or protestation, but to herself—in everything he contended was the essence of his life—she saw but toys her boy was playing with. These playthings were the continents, oceans and ships.

Gray spent seven days in the castle; on the eighth day, having taken along a large sum of money, he returned to Dubelt and said to Captain Hop:

"I thank you. You've been a good friend. Farewell now, my mentor." He sealed the word with a handshake as fierce as an iron vice. "From now on I'll be sailing alone, on a ship of my own."

The blood rushed to Hop's head, he spat, yanked his hand away and stalked off, but Gray overtook him and put his arm around his shoulders. And so they went to a tavern all together, twenty-four of them, counting the crew, and drank, and shouted, and sang, and ate, and downed everything there was in the bar and in the kitchen.

But a short while later the evening star flashed above the black line of a new mast in the Port of Dubelt. It was the *Secret,* a two-hundred-and-sixty-ton, three-masted galliot Gray had purchased. Arthur Gray sailed it for four more years as the owner and captain until chance brought him to Liss. However, he had remembered for always that short burst of throaty laughter that had greeted him at home, and so twice a year he visited the castle, leaving the silver-haired woman with an uncertain conviction that such a big boy might perhaps be able to handle his toys after all.

III

DAWN

The stream of foam cast off by the stern of Gray's *Secret* crossed the ocean as a white streak and faded in the flow of the evening lights of Liss. The ship dropped anchor near the lighthouse.

For the next ten days the *Secret* unloaded tussore silk, coffee and tea; the crew spent the eleventh day ashore, relaxing in alcoholic

fumes; on the twelfth day, for no good reason, Gray was blackly despondent and could not understand this despondency.

He had barely come awake in the morning when he felt that this day had begun in a black shroud. He dressed glumly, ate breakfast half-heartedly, forgot to read the newspaper and smoked for a long while, plunged into an inexpressible mood of futile tension; among the vaguely emerging words unacknowledged desires roamed, destroying each other through equal effort. Then he got down to work.

Accompanied by the boatswain, Gray inspected the ship and ordered the guy ropes tightened, the tiller rope loosened, the hawse cleaned, the tack changed, the deck tarred, the compass wiped and the hold opened, aired and swept. However, this did not dispel his dark mood. Filled with an uneasy awareness of the gloom of the day, he spent it irritably and sadly: it was as if someone had called to him, but he had forgotten who it was and whence.

Towards evening he settled back in his cabin, picked up a book and argued with the author at length, making marginal notes of a paradoxical nature. For a while he was amused by this game, this conversation with a dead man holding sway from the grave. Then, lighting his pipe, he became immersed in the blue smoke, living among the spectral arabesques that appeared in its shifting planes.

Tobacco is very potent; as oil poured onto the surging rent between the waves allays their frenzy, so does tobacco soothe irritation and dull the emotions by several degrees; they become calmer and more musical. Therefore, after three pipes, Gray's depression finally lost its aggressive nature and was transformed into thoughtful distraction. This state lasted for about another hour; when the fog lifted from his soul, Gray came to with a start, hungered for exercise and went up on deck. It was night; alongside, in the slumbering black water, there dozed the stars and the lights of the mast lanterns. The air, as warm as a cheek, brought in the smell of the sea. Gray raised his head and squinted at the gold coal of a star; instantly, through the dizzying distance, the fiery needle of a remote planet penetrated his pupils. The muted noise of the town at evening reached his ears from the depths of the bay; sometimes a phrase from the shore was wafted in across the sensitive surface of the water; it would sound clearly, as if spoken on deck and then be snuffed out by the creaking of the rigging; a match flared on

the forecastle deck, lighting up a hand, a pair of round eyes and a moustache. Gray whistled; the lighted pipe moved and floated towards him; soon, in the dark, the captain made out the hands and face of the man on watch.

"Tell Letika he's coming with me," Gray said. "Tell him to take along the fishing tackle."

He went down into the rowboat where he waited for Letika for about ten minutes; a nimble, shifty-eyed youth banged the oars against the side as he handed them down to Gray; then he climbed down himself, fitted them into the oarlocks and stuck a bag of provisions into the stern of the rowboat. Gray sat at the tiller.

"Where to, Captain?" Letika asked, rowing in a circle with the right oar alone.

The captain was silent. The sailor knew that one could not intrude upon this silence and, therefore, falling silent as well, he began rowing swiftly.

Gray set their course out to sea and then steered them along the left bank. He did not care where they were going. The tiller gurgled; the oars creaked and splashed; all else was sea and silence.

In the course of a day a person heeds to so many thoughts, impressions, speeches and words that together they would fill many a heavy tome. The face of a day takes on a definite expression, but today Gray searched this face in vain. Its obscure features glowed with one of those emotions of which there are many, but which have not been given a name. No matter what they are called, they will forever remain beyond the scope of words and even concepts, so like the effect of an aroma. Gray was now at the mercy of just such an emotion; true, he might have said: "I am waiting. I see. I shall soon know,"—but even these words were equal to no more than are the separate drawings in relation to architectural conception. Yet, there was the power of radiant excitement in these ideas.

The bank appeared to the left like a wavy thickening of darkness. Sparks from the chimneys danced above the red glass of the windows; this was Kaperna. Gray could hear shouting, wrangling and barking. The lights of the village resembled a firebox door that has burned through in tiny spots to let you see the flaming coal inside. To the right was the ocean as real as the presence of a sleeping person. Having

passed Kaperna, Gray steered towards the shore. The water lapped against it softly here; lighting his lantern, he saw the pits in the bluff and its upper, overhanging ledges; he liked the spot.

"We'll fish here," Gray said, tapping the oarsman on the shoulder.

The sailor harrumphed vaguely.

"This is the first time I've ever sailed with such a captain," he muttered. "He's a sensible captain, but no *ordinary* kind. A difficult captain. But I like him all the same."

He stuck the oar into the silt and tied the boat to it and they both scrambled up the stones that rolled out from under their knees and elbows. There was a thicket at the top of the bluff. The sound of an axe splitting a dry trunk followed; having felled the tree, Letika made a campfire on the bluff. Shadows moved, and the flames that were reflected in the water; in the receding gloom the grass and branches stood out; the air, mingled with smoke, shimmered and glowed above the fire.

Gray sat by the campfire.

"Here," he said, proffering a bottle, "drink to all teetotallers, my friend Letika. And, by the way, the vodka you brought along is flavoured with ginger, not quinine."

"I'm sorry, Captain," the sailor replied, catching his breath. "If you don't mind, I'll eat it down with this..." At which he bit off half a roast chicken and, extracting a wing from his mouth, continued: "I know you like quinine. But it was dark, and I was in a hurry. Ginger, you see, embitters a man. I always drink ginger vodka when I have to fight."

As the captain ate and drank, the sailor kept stealing glances at him and, finally, unable to contain himself any longer, he said:

"Is it true, Captain, what they say? That you come from a noble family?"

"That's of no importance, Letika. Take your tackle and fish a while if you want to."

"What about you?"

"Me? I don't know. Maybe. But ... later."

Letika unwound his line, chanting in rhyme, something he was a past master at, to the delight of the crew.

"From a string and piece of wood I made a very fine, long whip. Then I found a hook to fit it, and I whistled sharp and quick." He

poked about in a tin of worms. "This old worm lived in a burrow and was happy as could be, but I've got him hooked real good now, and the perch will all thank me." Finally, he walked off, singing: "Moonlight shines, the vodka's perfect, fishes, harken, I draw near. Herrings—faint, and sturgeon—skitter, Letika is fishing here!"

Gray lay down by the fire, gazing at the water and the reflection of the flames. He was thinking, but effortlessly; in this condition one's mind, while observing one's surroundings absently, comprehends them but dimly; it rushes on like a stallion in a jostling herd, crushing and shoving aside, and halting; emptiness, confusion and delay attend it in turn. It wanders within the souls of things; from bright agitation it hurries to secret intimations; passing from earth to sky, conversing on the subject of life with imaginary personages, snuffing out and embellishing one's memories. In this cloudy movement all is live and palpable, and all is as loosely hung together as a hallucination. And one's relaxing consciousness often smiles,. seeing, for instance, one's thoughts on life suddenly accosted by a most inopportune visitor: perhaps a twig broken two years before. Thus was Gray thinking by the fire, but he was "somewhere else"—not there.

The elbow he was leaning on, while supporting his head on his hand, became damp and numb. The stars shone faintly; the gloom was intensified by a tenseness preceding dawn. The captain was dozing off, but did not realize it. He felt like having a drink, and he put his hand out towards the sack, untying it *in his sleep*. Then he stopped dreaming; the next two hours were to him no longer than the seconds during which he had laid his head upon his arms. Meanwhile, Letika had appeared by the campfire twice, he had smoked and, out of curiosity, had looked into the mouths of the fish he had caught, wondering what might be there. But, quite naturally, nothing was.

Upon awakening, Gray forgot for a moment how he happened to be where he was. He gazed in astonishment at the cheerful shine of the morning, the bluff adorned by bright branches and the blazing blue distance. The leaves of a hazel bush hung over the horizon and also over his feet. At the bottom of the bluff—Gray felt it was right at his back—the tide lapped softly. Falling from a leaf, a dewdrop spread over his sleepy face in a cold splatter. He rose. Light had triumphed everywhere. The cooling brands of the campfire clutched at life with a

tendril of smoke. Its aroma imparted a wild headiness to the pleasure of breathing the air of the green woods.

Letika was nowhere in sight; he was oblivious to all; he sweated as he fished with the zeal of a true gambler. Gray left the woods for the bush-dotted slope. The grass smoked and flamed; the moist flowers resembled children who had been forcibly scrubbed with cold water. The green world breathed with myriad tiny mouths, blocking Gray's way through its exultant cluster. The captain finally got to a clearing overgrown with grass and flowers, and here he saw a sleeping girl.

He cautiously moved aside a branch and stopped, feeling that he had made a dangerous discovery. But five steps away lay a tired Assol, curled up with one leg tucked under her and the other stretched out, and her head resting on her comfortably crossed arms. Her hair was mussed; a button had come undone at her collar, revealing a white hollow; her tumbled skirt had bared her knees; her lashes slept upon her cheek in the shadow of her delicately curved temple, half-covered by a dark lock; the pinky of her right hand, which was under her head, curled over the back of her head. Gray squatted and looked into the girl's face from below, never suspecting that he resembled the Faun in Arnold Böcklin's painting.

Perhaps, under other circumstances, he would have noticed the girl with his eyes *alone*, but now he saw her *differently*. Everything stirred, everything smiled within him. Naturally, he did not know her or her name, or, moreover, why she had fallen asleep on the shore; but he was very pleased by this. He liked pictures that were accompanied neither by an explanatory text nor by a caption. The impression such a picture makes is far more powerful; its content, unencumbered by words, becomes boundless, affirming all conjectures and thoughts.

The shadow cast by the leaves was approaching the trunks, but Gray still squatted there in that uncomfortable position. Everything about the girl was asleep: her dark hair slept, her dress slept, as did the pleats of her skirt; even the grass near her body, it seemed, was dozing out of sympathy. When the impression became complete, Gray entered its warm, engulfing waves and sailed off on it. Letika had been shouting for some time: "Captain! Where are you?", but the captain heard him not.

When he finally rose, a predilection for the unusual caught him

unawares with the determination and inspiration of an angered woman. Giving way to it pensively, he removed the treasured old ring from his finger, thinking, and not without reason, that perhaps, in this way, he was suggesting something essential to life, similar to orthography. He slipped the ring gently onto the pinky that showed white under the back of her head. The pinky twitched in annoyance and curled up. Glancing once again at this resting face, Gray turned to see the sailor's sharply-raised brows. Letika was gaping as he watched the captain's movements with the kind of astonishment Jonah must have felt as he gazed down the maw of his furnished whale.

"Ah, it's you, Letika! Look at her. Isn't she beautiful?"

A wondrous painting!" the sailor shouted in a whisper, for he liked bookish expressions. "There's something prepossessing in the presentation of the circumstances. I caught four morays and another one, as round as a bladder."

"Shh, Letika. Let's get out of here."

They retreated into the bushes. They should have turned back to the rowboat now, but Gray procrastinated, looking off into the distance at the low bank, where the morning smoke from the chimneys of Kaperna streamed over the greenery and the sand. In the smoke he once again saw the girl.

Then he turned determinedly and went down the slope; the sailor did not question him about what had happened, but walked on behind; he sensed that once again a compulsory silence ensued. Then they reached the first houses Gray suddenly said,

"Can your practised eye tell us where the tavern is, Letika?"

"It must be that black roof," Letika mused, "but then, again, maybe it isn't."

"What's so special about that roof?"

"I really don't know, Captain. Nothing more than the voice of my heart."

They approached the house; it was indeed Menners' tavern. Through the open window they could see a bottle on the table; beside it someone's dirty hand was milking a steel-grey moustache.

Although it was still early in the day there were three men in the common room. The coalman, the owner of the drunken grey moustache already noted, was sitting by the window; two fishermen were

lodged around some scrambled eggs and beer at a table set between the bar and an inner door. Menners, a tall young man with a dull, freckled face and that peculiar expression of bold cunning in his near-sighted eyes that is a distinctive feature of tradesmen in general, was wiping plates behind the counter. The window frame was imprinted in the sunshine on the dirty floor.

No sooner had Gray stepped into the strip of smoky light than Menners, bowing respectfully, came out from behind his enclosure. He had immediately sensed a *real* captain in Gray—a type of client rarely to be seen there. Gray ordered rum. Covering the table with a cloth become yellowed in the bustle of daily life, Menners brought over a bottle, but first licked the corner of the label that had come unstuck. Then he went back behind the counter to look intently now at Gray, now at the plate from which he was picking off a dry particle of food.

While Letika, having raised his glass between his hands, was whispering to it softly and glancing out the window, Gray summoned Hin Menners. Hin perched on the edge of a chair with a self-satisfied air, flattered at having been addressed, and especially flattered because this had been done by a simple crook of Gray's finger.

"I assume you know all the local inhabitants," Gray said in an even voice. "I would like to know the name of a girl in a kerchief, in a dress with pink flowers, auburn-haired, of medium height, between seventeen and twenty years of age. I came upon her not far from here. What is her name?"

He spoke with a firm simplicity of strength that made it impossible to evade his tone. Hin Menners squirmed inwardly and even smirked slightly, but outwardly he obeyed the nature of the address. However, he hesitated before replying—but only from a futile desire to guess what was up.

"Hm!" he said, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "It must be Sailing-ship Assol. She's a halfwit."

"Indeed?" Gray said indifferently, taking a big sip. "Why is she like that?"

"If you really want to know, I'll tell you."

And Hin told Gray of the time, seven years before, when, on the seashore, the girl had spoken to a man who collected folk songs.

Naturally, this story, in the years since the beggar had first affirmed its existence in the tavern, had taken the shape of a crude and ugly rumour, but the essence remained unchanged.

"And that's what she's been called ever since," Menners said. "She's called Sailing-ship Assol."

Gray glanced automatically at Letika, who was still behaving quietly and modestly, then his eyes turned to the dusty road outside the tavern, and he felt as if he had been struck—a double blow to his heart and head. Coming down the road towards him was the very same Sailing-ship Assol whom Menners had just described from a *clinical* point of view. Her striking features, which resembled the mystery of unforgettable, stirring, yet simple words, appeared to him now in the light of her gaze. The sailor and Menners both had their backs to the window and, in order that they not turn accidentally, Gray found the courage to shift his gaze to Hin's ginger eyes. After he had seen Assol's eyes, all the prejudice of Menners' story was dispelled. Meanwhile, Hin continued unsuspectingly:

"I can also add that her father is a real bastard. He drowned my pater like he was a cat or something. God forgive me. He..."

He was interrupted by an unexpected, wild howl coming from behind. The coalman, rolling his eyes fiercely and having cast off his drunken stupor, suddenly began bawling a song, but with such force that it made everyone jump:

Basket-maker, basket-maker,
Skin us for your baskets!

"You're roaring drunk again, you damn whaleboat!" Menners shouted. "Get out!"

But take care that you don't fall
Right into our caskets!

the coalman bawled and then, as if nothing were amiss, he dunked his moustache into a slopping glass.

Hin Menners shrugged indignantly.

"He's the scum of the earth," he said with the sinister dignity of the miser. "It happens every time!"

"Is there anything else you can tell me?" Gray asked.

"Me? I just told you her father's a bastard. On account of him, sir, I was orphaned, and while still a boy was forced to earn my bread by the sweat of my brow."

"You're lying!" the coalman said unexpectedly. "You're lying so foully and unnaturally that it's sobered me up."

Before Hin had a chance to open his mouth, the coalman addressed Gray:

"He's lying. His father was a liar, too; as was his mother. It runs in the family. Rest assured, *she's* as sane as you and me. I've spoken to her. She rode in my cart eighty-four times or a bit less. If a girl's walking home from town and I've sold all my coal, I'll always give her a lift. She might as well ride. I'm saying that she has a sane head on her shoulders. You can see that now. Naturally, she'd never talk to you, Hin Menners. But me, sir, in my free coal trade, I despise gossip and rumours. She talks like a grown-up, but her way of talking is strange. If you listen closely—it seems like just the same as you and me would say, and it is, but yet, it isn't. For instance, we got to talking about her trade. 'I'll tell you something,' she said, and her holding onto my shoulder like a fly to a bell-tower, 'my work isn't dull, but I keep wanting to think up something special. I want to find a way to make a boat that'll sail by itself, with oarsmen that'll really row; then, they'll dock at the shore, tie up and sit down on the beach to have a bite, just exactly as if they were alive.' I started laughing, see, 'cause I found it funny. So I said, 'Well, Assol, it's all because of the kind of work you do, that's why you think like this, but look around; the way other people work, you'd think they were fighting.' 'No,' she says, 'I know what I know. When a fisherman's fishing he keeps thinking he'll catch a *big* fish, bigger than anyone ever caught.' 'What about me?' 'You?' She laughed. 'I'll bet that when you fill your basket with coal you think it'll burst into bloom.' That's the words she used! That very moment, I confess, I don't know what made me do it, I looked into the empty basket, and I really thought I was seeing buds coming out of the basket twigs; the buds burst and leaves splashed all over the basket and were gone. I even sobered up a bit! But Hin Menners will lie in his teeth and never bat an eye—I know him!"

Finding the conversation to have taken an obviously insulting turn,

Menners looked at the coalman scathingly and disappeared behind the counter, from where he asked bitterly: "Do you want to order anything else?"

"No," said Gray, pulling out his purse. "We're getting up and leaving. Letika, you stay here. Come back this evening and don't say a word. Having discovered all you can, report to me. Understand?"

"My dear Captain," Letika said with a familiarity brought on by the rum, "only a deaf-mute would not have understood *this.*"

"Fine. And don't forget that not in a single instance of the many that may occur can you speak of me, or even mention my name. Goodbye!"

Gray left. From then on he was possessed by a consciousness of astonishing discoveries, like a spark in Berthold's powder mortar,—one of those spiritual avalanches from under which fire escapes, blazing. He was possessed by a desire for immediate action. He came to his senses and was able to think clearly only when he got into the rowboat. Laughing, he held out his hand, palm up, to the scorching sun, as he had done once as a boy in the wine cellar; then he shoved off and began rowing swiftly towards the harbour.

IV

ON THE EVE

On the eve of that day and seven years after Egle, the collector of folk songs, had told the little girl on the beach a fairy-tale about a ship with crimson sails, Assol returned home from her weekly visit to the toy shop feeling distressed and looking sad. She had brought back the toys that she had taken to be sold. She was so upset she could not speak at first, but after looking at Longren's anxious face and seeing that he expected news that was much worse than what had actually happened, she began to speak, running her finger over the window-pane by which she stood, gazing out at the sea absently.

The owner of the toy shop had begun this time by opening his ledger and showing her how much they owed him. She felt faint at the sight of the impressive, three-digit figure.

"This is how much you've received since December," the shopkeeper said, "and now we'll see how much has been sold." And he set his finger against another figure, but this one was a two-digit one.

"It was a pity and a shame to look. I could see by his face that he was rude and angry. I'd have gladly run away, but, honestly, I was so ashamed I had no strength to. And he went on to say: 'There's no profit in it for me any more, my dear girl. Imported goods are in demand now. All the shops are full of them, and nobody buys these kind.' That's what he said. He went on talking, but I've mixed up and forgotten what he said. He probably felt sorry for me, because he suggested I try the Children's Bazaar and Alladin's Lamp."

Having unburdened herself of that which was most important, the girl turned her head and looked at the old man timidly. Longren sat hunched over, his fingers locked between his knees on which his elbows rested. Sensing her eyes on him, he raised his head and sighed. Overcoming her depression, she ran up to him, settled down beside him and, slipping her small hand under the leather sleeve of his jacket, laughing and looking up into her father's face from below, she continued with feigned liveliness:

"Never mind, it's not important. You listen, now. Anyway, I left. Well, I came to the big, awfully frightening store; it was terribly crowded. People shoved me, but I made my way through and went over to a black-haired man in spectacles. I don't remember a word of what I said to him; finally, he snickered, poked about in my basket, looked at some of the toys, then wrapped them up in the kerchief again and handed them back."

Longren listened to her angrily. He seemed to be seeing his overawed daughter in the richly-dressed crowd at the counter piled high with fine goods. The neat man in the spectacles was explaining condescendingly that he would go bankrupt if he decided to offer Longren simple toys for sale. He had casually and expertly set up folding houses and railroad bridges on the counter before her; tiny, perfectly-made automobiles, electric sets, airplanes and motors. All of this smelled of paint and school. According to him, children nowadays only played games that imitated the occupations of their elders.

Then Assol had gone to Alladin's Lamp and to two other shops, but all in vain.

As she finished her tale she laid out their supper; having eaten and downed a mug of strong coffee, Longren said:

"Since we're out of luck, we'll have to start looking for something else. Perhaps I'll sign on a ship again—the *Fitzroy* or the *Palermo*. Of course, they're right," he continued thoughtfully, thinking of the toys. "Children don't play nowadays, they study. They keep on studying and studying, and will never begin to live. This is so, but it's a shame, it really is a shame. Will you be able to manage without me for one voyage? I can't imagine leaving you alone."

"I could sign up with you, too. Say, as a barmaid."

"No!" Longren sealed the word with a smack of his palm on the shuddering table. "You won't sign up as long as I'm alive. However, there's time to think of something."

He settled into a sullen silence. Assol sat down beside him on the edge of the stool; out of the corner of his eye, without turning his head, he could see that she was doing her best to console him and nearly smiled. No, if he smiled it would frighten her off and embarrass her. Mumbling to herself, she smoothed his tumbled grey hair, kissed his moustache and, covering her father's bristly ears with her small, tapering fingers, said,

"There, now you can't hear me say that I love you."

Longren had sat still while she had been making him pretty, as tense as a person afraid to inhale smoke, but hearing what she said, he laughed uproariously.

"You dear," he said simply and, after patting her cheek, went down to the beach to have a look at his rowboat.

For a while Assol stood pensively in the middle of the room, hesitating between a desire to give herself up to wistful melancholy and the necessity of seeing to the chores; then, having washed the dishes, she took store of the remains of their provisions. She neither weighed nor measured, but saw that they would not have enough flour to last out the week, that the bottom of the sugar tin was now visible; the packets of coffee and tea were nearly empty and there was no butter; the only thing on which her eye rested ruefully, as it was the sole excep-

tion, was a sack of potatoes. Then she scrubbed the floor and sat down to stitch a ruffle on a skirt made over from something else, but recalling instantly that the scraps of material were tucked behind the mirror, she went over to it and took out the little bundle; then she glanced at her reflection.

Beyond the walnut frame in the clear void of the reflected room was a small, slim girl dressed in cheap, white, pinkflowered muslin. A grey silk kerchief covered her shoulders. The still childish, lightly-tanned face was lively and expressive; her beautiful eyes, somewhat serious for her age, looked out with the timid intentness peculiar to sensitive souls. Her irregular face was endearing in its delicate purity of line; each curve, each elevation might have been found in many a woman's face, but taken all together the style was extremely original—originally sweet; we shall stop here. The rest cannot be expressed in words, save for one word: "enchantment".

The reflected girl smiled as impulsively as Assol. The smile turned out rather sad; noticing this, she became disturbed, as if she were looking at a stranger. She pressed her cheek against the glass, closed her eyes and stroked the mirror softly over her reflection. A swarm of hazy, tender thoughts flashed through her; she straightened up, laughed and sat down to sew.

While she is sewing, let us have a closer look at her—a look into her. She was made of *two* girls, *two* Assols mixed up in happy, wonderful confusion. One was the daughter of a sailor, a craftsman, a toy-maker, the other was a living poem, with all the marvels of its harmonies and images, with a mysterious alignment of words, in the interaction of light and shadow, cast by one upon the other. She knew life within the limits of her own experience, but besides the generalities, she saw the reflected meaning of a *different* order. Thus, looking into objects, we observe them not with a linear perception, but through impression—which is definitely human and—as is all that is human—distinct. Something similar to that which (if we have succeeded) we have portrayed by this example, she saw *above and beyond* the visible. Without these modest victories all that was simply understandable was alien to her. She loved to read, but in each book she read mostly between the lines, as she lived. Unconsciously, through inspiration, she made countless ethereally subtle discoveries

at every step, inexpressible, but as important as cleanliness and warmth. Sometimes—and this continued for a number of days—she even became transformed; the physical opposition of life fell away, like the stillness in the sweep of a bow across the strings; and all that she saw, that was vital to her, that surrounded her, became a lace of mystery in the image of the mundane. Many a time, apprehensive and afraid, did she go to the beach at night where, waiting for dawn to break, she looked off most intently, searching for the ship with the Crimson Sails. These minutes were pure joy to her; it is difficult for us to give ourselves up *thus* to a fairy-tale; it would be no less difficult for her to escape from its power and enchantment.

On some other occasion, thinking back over all this, she would sincerely wonder at herself, not being able to believe that she had believed, forgiving the sea with a smile and sadly coming back to reality; as she now gathered the ruffle she thought about her past life. There had been much that was dull and simple. The two of them being lonely together had at times weighed heavily on her, but there had formed within her by then that fold of inner shyness, that suffering wrinkle which prevents one from bringing or receiving cheer. Others mocked her, saying: "She's touched in the head", "out of her mind"—she had become accustomed to this pain, too. The girl had even suffered insults, after which her breast would ache as from a blow. She was not a popular girl in Kaperna, although many suspected that there was more to her than to others—but *in a different tongue.* The men of Kaperna adored stout, heavy-limbed women with oily skin on their large calves and powerful arms; they courted them here by slapping them on the back and jostling them as they would in a crowded market place. The style of such emotion resembled the unsophisticated simplicity of a roar. Assol was as well suited to this determined milieu as the society of a ghost would be to extremely high-strung people, had it even possessed all the charm of Assunta or Aspasia; anything resembling love here was out of the question. Thus, meeting the steady blast of a soldier's bugle, the sweet sadness of a violin is powerless to bring the stern regiment out from under the influence of its straight planes. The girl stood with her back to all that

has been said in these lines.

While she was humming a song of life, her small hands were working swiftly and adroitly; biting off a thread, she looked off, but this did not stop her from turning the hem evenly or stitching it with the accuracy of a sewing machine. Although Longren did not return, she was not worried about her father. Of late, he had often set out fishing in his boat at night or simply for some air. Fear did not gnaw at her: she knew that no ill would befall him. In this respect Assol was still the little girl that had prayed in her own way, lisping fondly, "Good morning, God!" in the morning and: "Goodbye, God!" in the evening.

In her opinion such a first-hand acquaintance with God was quite sufficient for Him to ward off any disaster. She imagined herself in His place: God was forever occupied with the affairs of millions of people and, therefore, she believed that one should regard the ordinary shadows of life with the polite patience of a guest who, discovering the house full of people, waits for the bustling host, finding food and shelter as best he can.

Having done with her sewing, Assol folded her work on the corner table, undressed and went to bed. The lamp had been turned off. She soon noticed that she was not sleepy; her mind was as clear as it was in the middle of the day, and even the darkness seemed artificial; her body, as her mind, felt carefree and dayish. Her heart beat as rapidly as a pocket watch; it seemed to be beating between the pillow and her ear. Assol was annoyed; she twisted and turned, now flinging off the blanket, now rolling up in it, pulling it over her head. At last she was able to bring on the familiar scene that helped her to fall asleep: she imagined herself tossing pebbles into clear water and watching the faint circles grow wider and wider. Sleep seemed to have been awaiting this handout; it came, whispered with Mary, who stood at the head of the bed and, obeying her smile, said "Shhh" to everything all around. Assol was asleep instantly. She dreamed her favourite dream: of blossoming trees, a yearning, enchantment, songs and strange scenes, of which, upon awakening, she could recall only the glitter of the blue water rising from her feet to her heart with a chill of delight. After dreaming of all this, she remained in that improbable

world for a while longer and then awakened fully and sat up.

She was not at all sleepy, quite as if she had not fallen asleep at all. A feeling of novelty, of joy and desire for action welled up in her. She looked around with the eyes of one examining a new room. Dawn seeped in—not with the complete lucidity of illumination, but with that faint effort through which one can comprehend one's surroundings. The bottom of the window was black; the top had become light. Without, by the edge of the window frame, the morning star twinkled. Knowing that she would not fall asleep again, Assol dressed, went over to the window and raising the hook, opened it. An attentive, clear silence reigned outside; it seemed to have only now descended. In the blue twilight the bushes shimmered; farther on the trees slept; the air was heavy and smelled of the earth.

Leaning her hand on the top of the frame, the girl looked out and smiled. Suddenly, something akin to a distant call stirred her both from within and without, and she seemed to awaken once again from obvious reality to that which was clearer still and still more doubtless. From that moment on she was caught up by an exultant richness of consciousness. Thus, comprehending them, we listen to words spoken by others, but if one were to repeat that which was said, we would come to understand them once again with a different, a new meaning. She, too, now experienced this.

Picking up an old but, when she wore it, ever fresh and new silk kerchief, she grasped it under her chin with one hand, locked the door and darted out onto the road barefoot. Although all was deserted and still, she imagined she resounded like an orchestra and could actually be heard. Everything pleased her, everything gladdened her eye. The warm dust tickled her bare feet; the air was clear and a joy to breathe. The rooftops and clouds were etched in black against the clearing twilight of the sky; the fences, briar roses, gardens, orchards and the faintly seen road all dozed. In everything there was noticeable a different order than during the day—the same, yet, in a conformity that had formerly evaded one. Everything slept with open eyes, furtively examining the passing girl.

She quickened her step as she got farther away, in a hurry to leave the village behind. There were meadows beyond Kaperna; beyond the meadows hazel bushes, poplars and chestnut trees dotted the slopes of

the hills along the shore. At the spot where the road ended and continued as an overgrown path, a silky little black dog with a white chest and eyes tensed to speak circled gently by Assol's feet. The dog, recognizing Assol, walked along beside her, squealing from time to time and wriggling its body coquettishly, silently agreeing with the girl about something as clear as "you" and "me". Assol, glancing into its communicative eyes, was convinced that the dog could have spoken if it had not had a secret reason for not doing so. Glimpsing its companion's smile, the dog crinkled its nose cheerfully, wagged its tail and trotted on ahead, but suddenly sat down indifferently, scratched its ear which had been bitten by its eternal enemy, and ran off.

Assol entered the tall meadow grass that splashed dew upon her; holding her hand out, palm-down, above its spikelets, she walked on, smiling at the streaming touch. Peering into the very special faces of the flowers, the confusion of stems, she could make out allusions—poses, efforts, movements, features and expressions that were nearly human; she would not now have been surprised at a procession of field mice, a gophers' ball or the rough antics of a hedgehog, scaring a sleeping gnome with its huffing. Indeed, a grey ball of a hedgehog rolled across her path. "Humph-humph," it snorted angrily, like a cabbie at a pedestrian. Assol spoke with those whom she saw and understood. "Hello, poor thing," she said to a purple, worm-eaten iris. "You'd better stay home for a while,"—this was said to a bush stranded in the middle of the path and, therefore, lacking leaves torn off by the clothes of passers-by. A large beetle was clutching a bluebell, pulling the flower down and slipping, but scrabbling up it stubbornly. "Shake off the fat passenger," Assol advised it. True enough, die beetle lost its grip and flew off noisily. Thus, with pounding heart, trembling and flushed, she approached the slope of a hill and was concealed from the openness of the meadow in the thicket where she was surrounded by true friends who—and she knew this—spoke in deep bass voices.

These were the large old trees that grew amongst the honeysuckle and hazel bushes. Their drooping branches brushed the top leaves of the bushes. White flower cones rose among the solemn gravity of the large chestnut leaves, their aroma blended with the scent of the dew

and the sap. The path, criss-crossed by the slippery bulges of roots, now dipped, now clambered up the slope. Assol felt at home here; she greeted the trees as if they were people, that is, by pressing their broad leaves. She walked on, whispering to herself or aloud: "Here you are, here's another you. How many of you there are, my friends! I'm in a hurry, boys, let me pass! I recognize you all, I remember you and respect you." Her "boys" patted her grandly as best they could—with their leaves—and creaked with an air of kindredness in reply. Feet muddied, she made her way out to the bluff above the sea and stood at the very edge, breathing hard after her fast walk. A deep, unconquerable faith rejoiced and bubbled exultantly inside of her. Her gaze cast it beyond the horizon, from whence it returned in the faint surge of the incoming waves, proud in its clean flight.

Meanwhile, the sea, stitched with a golden thread along the horizon, was still asleep; save at the foot of the bluff did the water rise and fall. The steel grey of the sleeping ocean at the shore became blue and then black farther off. Beyond the golden thread the sky, flaring up, glowed in a great fan of light; the white clouds were now touched with pink. Delicate, heavenly tints shimmered within them. A quivering snow-whiteness spread across the distant blackness; the foam sparkled and the blood-red splash, flaring up along the golden thread, sent crimson ripples across the ocean to Assol's feet.

She sat down and hugged her knees. She leaned towards the sea and gazed off at the horizon with eyes that had grown large and in which nothing grown-up remained at all—with the eyes of a child. Everything she had awaited so long and so fervently was taking place there, at the end of the world. In that land of distant abysses she imagined an undersea hill; streaming thongs of seaweed snaked upward from its slopes; amongst the round leaves pierced by a stem at the edge strange flowers shone. The upper leaves glistened on the surface of the ocean; he who knew not what Assol knew would see only a shimmering and glitter.

A ship rose from the seaweed; it surfaced and stopped in the very middle of the sunrise. From this great distance it was as clearly visible as the clouds. Radiating joy, it flamed like wine, a rose, blood, lips, red velvet and scarlet fire. The ship was heading straight towards Assol. Two wings of spray were cast up by the powerful thrust of its

keel; rising, the girl pressed her hands to her breast, but the magic play of light became ripples: the sun rose, and a bright fullness of morning tore the covers from everything that still languished and stretched on the sleepy earth.

The girl sighed and looked around. The music had ended, but Assol was still under the spell of its ringing chorus. This impression gradually weakened, then became a memory and, finally, simply weariness. She lay down in the grass, yawned and, closing her eyes blissfully, fell asleep—a sleep as deep and sound as a young nut, without cares or dreams.

She was awakened by a fly crawling along her bare sole. Assol wriggled her foot impatiently and awoke; sitting up, she pinned back her dishevelled hair and, therefore, Gray's ring made itself known, but believing it to be simply a blade of grass that had become caught between her fingers, she held them out. However, since the hindrance did not disappear, she raised her hand to her eyes impatiently and instantly jumped to her feet with the force of a shooting fountain.

Gray's radiant ring sparkled on her finger as on someone else's, for at this moment she could not claim it to be *her own,* she did not feel the finger to belong to her.

"Whose ring is this? Whose joke is this?" she cried. "Am I still sleeping? Maybe I found it and forgot about it?"

She gripped her right hand, on which the ring was placed, with her left, looked around in wonder, searching out the sea and the green thickets with her gaze; but no one moved, no one was hiding in the bushes, and there was no sign in the vastly illumined blue sea. A flush consumed Assol, and the voices of her heart murmured the prophetic "yes". There was no explanation for what had happened, but she found it without words or thoughts in her strange feeling, and the ring now became dear to her. She trembled as she pulled it off her finger and held it in her cupped hand like water as she examined it—with her soul, her heart, the boundless joy and clear superstition of youth—then, tucking it into her bodice, Assol buried her face in her hands from under which a smile strained to burst forth and, lowering her head, she slowly followed the road back home.

Thus, *by chance,* as people say who can read and write, Gray and Assol found each other on a summer's morning so full of inevitability.

V

PREPARING FOR BATTLE

After Gray returned to the deck of the *Secret* he stood there motionlessly for some minutes, running his hand over his head from back to front, which indicated a state of utter confusion. Absent-mindedness—a veiled movement of the emotions—was reflected in the senseless smile of the sleepwalker on his face. His mate, Panten, was at that moment coming along the quarter-deck, carrying a dish of fried fish; sighting Gray, he noted the captain's strange state.

"You're not hurt, are you, sir?" he inquired cautiously. "Where were you? What did you see? Actually, though, that's none of my business. An agent has offered us a profitable cargo with a bonus. But what's the matter with you, sir?"

"Thank you," Gray said with a sigh, as if he had been untied. "That was just what I needed, the sound of your simple, intelligent voice. It's like a dash of cold water. Tell the crew we're weighing anchor today, Panten, and moving into the mouth of the Liliana, about ten miles from here. The river bed is dotted with shoals. Come for the chart. We won't need a pilot. That's all for now... Oh, yes, I need that profitable cargo like I need last year's snow. You can tell the agent that's what I said. I'm going to town now, and I'll be there till evening.

"But what happened?"

"Nothing at all, Panten. I want you to bear in mind my desire to avoid all questions. When the time comes, I'll tell you what it's all about. Tell the crew that we'll put up for repairs and that the local drydock is occupied."

"Yes, sir," Panten replied dazedly to Gray's retreating back. "Aye, aye, sir."

Although the captain's orders were quite sensible, the mate was goggled-eyed and raced off to his own cabin, carrying the dish of fish and mumbling: "You're puzzled, Panten. Is he thinking of trying his hand at smuggling? Will we be flying the Jolly Roger now?" At this Panten became confused by the wildest guesses. While he nervously wolfed down the fish, Gray went to his cabin, took out a sum of money and, crossing the bay, appeared in the shopping section of Liss. Now,

however, he acted determinedly and calmly, knowing down to the last detail all that he would do on this wondrous journey. Each motion—thought, movement—warmed him as with the refined joy of creative work. His plan was formed instantly and vividly. His understanding of life had undergone that last attack of the chisel after which marble is serene in its magnificent glowing.

Gray visited three shops, placing especial stress on the accuracy of his choice, since he was quite sure of the exact shade colour he wanted. In the first two shops he was shown silk of gaudy hues, intended to please an unsophisticated vanity; in the third he found samples of imaginative tints. The shopkeeper bustled about cheerfully, spreading out fabrics from his old stock, but Gray was as serious as an anatomist. He patiently unfolded parcels and bolts, laid them aside, moved them together, unrolled and brought up to the light so many crimson strips that the counter, piled high with them, seemed about to burst into flame. A scarlet wave fell upon the tip of Gray's boot; a pink reflection shone on his hands and face. As he rummaged among the slight resistance of the silk he noted the colours: cerise, pink and old rose; the richly simmering cherry, orange and gloomy iron reds; here there were shades of all density and strength, as different in their imaginary kinship as are the words: "charming", "wonderful", "magnificent", "exquisite"; in the folds there lurked allusions inaccessible to the language of the eyesight, but a true crimson tone evaded our captain for quite some time. The fabrics the shopkeeper brought out were good, but they did not evoke a clear, firm "yes". At last, one colour attracted the disarmed attention of the buyer; he sat down in an armchair by the window, pulled a long strip from the rustling bolt, dropped it on his knees and, sitting back with his pipe clenched between his teeth, became contemplatively still.

This colour, as absolutely pure as a crimson ray of morning, full of noble joy and regality, was just exactly the proud colour Gray was searching for. It did not contain the mixed shades of fire, poppy petals, the play of lilac or purple tints; nor was there any blueness or shadow—nothing to raise any doubt. It glowed like a smile with the charm of spiritual reflection. Gray became so lost in thought that he forgot about the shopkeeper who stood at his elbow with the alertness of a hunting dog pointing. Tiring of waiting, the merchant called

attention to himself by the crack of a piece of cloth being ripped.

"That's enough samples," Gray said, rising. "I'm taking this silk."

"The whole bolt?" the merchant asked, politely doubting. But Gray stared at his forehead in silence, which prodded the shopkeeper to assume an undue familiarity. "How many metres, then?"

Gray nodded, as if telling the man to wait, and, with a pencil, figured the amount he needed on a slip of paper.

"Two thousand metres." He inspected the shelves dubiously. "Not more than two thousand metres."

"Two?" said the shopkeeper, jumping like a jack-in-the-box. "Thousand? Metres? Please sit down, Captain. Would you like to see our latest samples, Captain? As you wish. May I offer you a match, and some excellent tobacco? Two thousand ... two thousand at..." He named a price which had as much to do with the real price as a vow does with a simple "yes", but Gray was satisfied, because he did not wish to bargain over anything. "A magnificent, excellent silk," the shopkeeper was saying, "unexcelled in quality. You won't find this anyplace else but here."

When the man had finally run out of laudation, Gray arranged to have the silk delivered, paid his bill, including this service, and left. He was seen to the door by the shopkeeper with as much pomp as if he were a Chinese emperor. Meanwhile, somewhere nearby, a street musician, having tuned his cello, drew his bow gently across it, making it speak out sadly and wonderfully; his comrade, the flutist, showered the singing of the strings with a trilling of throaty whistling; the simple song with which they filled the sun-sleepy yard reached Gray's ears, and he knew instantly what he had to do. Actually, all these days he had existed at that propitious height of spiritual vision from which he could clearly note every hint and prompt offered by reality. Upon hearing the sounds, drowned out by passing carriages, he entered into the very heart of the most important impressions and thoughts brought forth, in keeping with his nature, by this music, and could foresee why and how that which he had thought of would turn out well. Passing the lane, Gray entered the gate of the house from where the music was coming. By this time the musicians were getting ready to move on; the tall flutist, with an air of dignity brought low, waved his hat gratefully at those windows from which coins were tossed. The

cello was locked under its owner's arm again; he was mopping his wet brow and waiting for the flutist.

"Why, it's you, Zimmer!" Gray said to him, recognizing the violinist who entertained the seamen in the evenings with his magnificent playing at the Money on the Barrel Inn. "Why have you forsaken your violin?"

"Dear Captain," Zimmer objected smugly, "I play anything that makes sounds and rattles. In my youth I was a musical clown. I have now developed a passion for art, and I realize with a heavy heart that I've squandered away a real talent. That is why, from a feeling of late-come greed, I love two at once: the cello and the violin. I play the cello in the daytime and the violin in the evening, so that I seem to be weeping, to be sobbing over a lost talent. Will you offer me some wine? Hm? The cello is my Carmen, but the violin..."

"Is Assol," Gray said.

Zimmer misunderstood.

"Yes," he nodded, "a solo played on cymbals or brass pipes is something else again. However, what do I care? Let the clowns of art grimace and twitch—I know that fairies dwell within the violin and the cello."

"And what dwells in my tur-i-loo?" the flutist asked as he walked up. He was a tall fellow with a sheep's blue eyes and a curly blond beard. "Tell me that now."

"It all depends on how much you've had to drink since morning. Sometimes it's a bird, and sometimes it's liquor fumes. Captain, may I present my partner Düss? I told him about the way you throw your money around when you're drinking, and he's fallen in love with you, sight unseen."

"Yes," Düss said, "I love a grand gesture and generosity. But I'm a sly fellow, so don't trust my vile flattery."

"Well, now," Gray said and smiled, "I'm pressed for time, and the matter is urgent. I can offer you a chance to earn some good money. Put together an orchestra, but not one that's made up of fops with funeral parlour faces who've forgotten in their musical pedantry or,—worse still—in their gastronomical soundings, all about the soul of music and are slowly spreading a pall over the stage with their intricate noises,—no. Get together your friends who can make the simple

hearts of cooks and butlers weep, get together your wandering tribe. The sea and love do not stand for pedants. I'd love to have a drink with you and polish off more than one bottle, but I must go. I've got a lot to attend to. Take this and drink to the letter *A*. If you accept my proposition, come to the *Secret* this evening. It's moored near the first dam."

"Right!" Zimmer cried, knowing that Gray paid like a king. "Bow, Düss, say 'yes' and twirl your hat from joy! Captain Gray has decided to get married!"

"Yes," Gray replied simply. "I'll tell you the details on board the *Secret*. As for you..."

"Here's to A!" Düss nudged Zimmer and winked at Gray. "But ... there are so many letters in the alphabet! Won't you give us something for *Z*, too?"

Gray gave them some more money. The musicians departed. He then went to a commission agent and placed a secret order for a rush job, to be completed in six day's time, and costing an impressive amount. As Gray returned to his ship the agent was boarding a steamboat. Towards evening the silk was delivered; Letika had not yet returned, nor had the musicians arrived; Gray went off to talk to Panten.

It should be noted that in the course of several years Gray had been sailing with the same crew. At first, the captain had puzzled the sailors by the eccentric nature of his voyages and stops—which sometimes lasted for months—in the most trade-lacking, unpopulated places, but in time they were inspired by Gray's "grayism". Often he would sail with ballast alone, having refused to take on a profitable cargo for the sole reason that he did not like the freight offered. No one could ever talk him into taking on a load of soap, nails, machine parts or some such that would lie silently in the hold, evoking lifeless images of dull necessity. But he was always ready to take on fruit, china, animals, spices, tea, tobacco, coffee, silk and rare varieties of wood: ebony, sandalwood and teak. All this was in keeping with the aristocratism of his imagination, creating a picturesque atmosphere; small wonder then that crew of the *Secret*, having been nurtured thus in the spirit of originality, should look down somewhat upon all other ships, engulfed as they were in the smoke of plain, ordinary profit. Still and all, this

time Gray noted their questioning looks: even the dumbest sailor knew that there was no need to put up for repairs in a forest river.

Panten had naturally passed Gray's orders on to them. When Gray entered his mate was finishing his sixth cigar and pacing up and down the cabin, dizzy from so much smoke and stumbling over chairs. Evening was approaching; a golden shaft of light protruded through the open porthole, and in it the polished visor of the captain's cap flashed.

"Everything's shipshape," Panten said sullenly. "We can weigh anchor now if you wish."

"You should know me by now," Gray said kindly. "There's no mystery about what I'm doing. As soon as we drop anchor in the Liliana I'll tell you all about it, and you won't have to waste so many matches on cheap cigars. Go on and weigh anchor."

Panten smiled uncomfortably and scratched an eyebrow.

"Yes, I know. Not that I ... all right."

After he was gone Gray sat very still for a while, looking out of the door that was slightly ajar, and then went to his own cabin. There he first sat, then lay down and then, listening to the clatter of the windlass pulling up the loud chain, was about to go up to the forecastle deck but fell to pondering and returned to the table where his finger drew a quick, straight line across the oilcloth. A fist struck against the door brought him out of his maniacal trance; he turned the key, letting in Letika. The sailor, panting loudly, stood there looking like a messenger who has averted an execution at the very last moment.

"Let's go, Letika, I said to myself from where I stood on the pier," he said, speaking rapidly, "when I saw the boys here dancing around the windlass and spitting on their hands. I have an eagle-eye. And I flew. I was breathing down the boatman's back so hard he broke out in a nervous sweat. Did you want to leave me behind, Captain?"

"Letika," Gray said, peering at his bloodshot eyes, "I expected you back no later than this morning. Did you pour cold water on the back of your head?"

"Yes. Not as much as went down the hatch, but I did. I've done everything."

"Let's have it."

"There's no sense talking, Captain. It's all written down here. Read it. I did my best. I'm leaving."

"Where to?"

"I can see by the look on your face that I didn't pour enough cold water on my head."

He turned and exited with the strange movement of a blind man. Gray unfolded the slip of paper; the pencil must have been surprised as it produced the scrawl that resembled a crooked fence. This is what Letika had written:

"Following orders. I went down the street after 5 p. m. A house with a grey roof and two windows on either side; it has a vegetable garden. The person in question came out twice: once for water and once for kindling for the stove. After dark was able to look into the window, but saw nothing on account of the curtain."

There followed several notations of a domestic nature which Letika had apparently gleaned in conversation over a bottle, since the memorandum ended rather abruptly with the words: "Had to add a bit of my own to square the bill."

However, the gist of the report stated but that which we know of from the first chapter. Gray put the paper in his desk, whistled for the watch and sent the man for Panten, but the boatswain Atwood showed up instead, hastily pulling down his rolled-up sleeves.

"We've tied up at the dam. Panten sent me down to see what the orders are. He's busy fighting off some men with horns, drums and other violins. Did you tell them to come aboard? Panten asked you to come up. He says his head's spinning."

"Yes, Atwood. I invited the musicians aboard. Tell them to go to the crew's quarters meanwhile. We'll see to them later. Tell them and the crew I'll be up on deck in fifteen minutes, I want everyone in attendance. I presume you and Panten will also listen to what I have to say."

Atwood cocked his left brow. He stood by the door for a few moments and then sidled out.

Gray spent the next ten minutes with his face buried in his hands; he was not preparing himself for anything, nor was he calculating. He simply wished to be silent for a while. In the meantime, everyone awaited him anxiously and with a curiosity full of surmise. He emerged

and saw in their faces an expectation of improbable things, but since he considered that which was taking place to be quite natural, the tenseness of these other people's souls was reflected in his own as a slight annoyance.

"It's nothing out of the ordinary," said Gray, sitting down on the bridge ladder. "We'll lie to in the river till we change the rigging. You've all seen the red silk that's been delivered. The sailmaker Blent will be in charge of making new sails from it for the *Secret.* We'll then set sail, but I can't say where to. At any rate, it won't be far from here. I am going for my wife. She's not my wife yet, but she will be. I must have red sails on my ship so that, according to the agreement, she can spot us from afar. That is all. As you see, there's nothing mysterious in all this. And we'll say no more about it."

"Indeed," said Atwood, sensing from the crew's smiling faces that they were pleasantly surprised but did not venture to speak. "So that's it, Captain... It's not for us to judge. We can only obey. Everything'll be as you wish. May I offer my congratulations."

"Thank you!"

Gray gripped the boatswain's hand, but the latter, through superhuman effort, returned the handshake so firmly the captain yielded. Then the crew came up, mumbling words of congratulations with one man's warm smile replacing another's. No one shouted, no one cheered—for the men had sensed something very special in the captain's short speech. Panten heaved a sigh of relief and brightened visibly—the weight that had lay on his heart melted away. The ship's carpenter was the only one who seemed displeased. He shook Gray's hand listlessly and said morosely:

"How'd you ever think of it, Captain?"

"It was like a blow of your axe. Zimmer! Let's see your boys."

The violinist, slapping the musicians on the back, pushed seven sloppily dressed men out of the crowd.

"Here," Zimmer said. "This is the trombone. He doesn't play, he blasts. These two beardless boys are trumpeters; when they start playing, everybody feels like going off to war. Then there's the clarinet, the cornet and the second fiddle. All of them are past masters at accompanying the lively prima, meaning me. And here's the headmaster of our merry band—Fritz, the drummer. You know, drummers usually

look disappointed, but this one plays with dignity and fervour. There's something open-hearted and as straight as his drumsticks about his playing. Will there be anything else, Captain Gray?"

"Magnificent. A place has been set aside for you in the hold, which this time, apparently, will be filled with all sorts of scherzos, adagios and fortissimos. To your places, men. Cast off and head out, Panten! I'll relieve you in two hours."

He did not notice the passing of these two hours, as they slipped by to the accompaniment of the same inner music that never abandoned his consciousness, as the pulse does not abandon the arteries. He had but one thought, one wish, one goal. Being a man of action, in his mind's eye he anticipated the events, regretting only that they could not be manipulated as quickly and easily as chequers on a board. Nothing about his calm exterior bespoke the inner tension whose booming, like the clanging of a great bell overhead, reverberated through his body as a deafening, nervous moan. It finally caused him to begin counting to himself: "One ... two ... thirthy..."—and so on, until he said: "One thousand." This mental exercise had its effect; he was finally able to take a detached view of the project. He was somewhat surprised at not being able to imagine what Assol was like as a person, for he had never even spoken to her. He had once read that one could, though incompletely, understand a person if, imaging one's self to be that person, one imitated the expression of his face. Gray's eyes had already begun to assume a strange expression that was alien to them, and his lips under his moustache were curling up into a faint, timid smile, when he suddenly came to his senses, burst out laughing and went up to relieve Panten.

It was dark. Panten had raised the collar of his jacket and was pacing back and forth by the compass, saying to the helmsman:

"Port, one quarter point. Port. Stop. A quarter point more."

The *Secret* was sailing free at half tack.

"You know," Panten said to Gray, "I'm pleased."

"What by?"

"The same thing you are. Now I know. It came to me right here on the bridge." He winked slyly as the fire of his pipe lighted his smile.

"You don't say?" Gray replied, suddenly understanding what he was getting at. "And what do you know?"

"It's the best way to smuggle it in. Anybody can have whatever kind of sails he wants to. You're a genius, Gray!"

"Poor old Panten!" the captain said, not knowing whether to be angry or to laugh. "Your guess is a clever one, but it lacks any basis in fact. Go to bed. You have my word for it that you're wrong. I'm doing exactly as I said."

He sent him down to sleep, checked their course and sat down. We shall leave him now, for he needs to be by himself.

VI

ASSOL REMAINS ALONE

Longren spent the night at sea; he neither slept nor fished, but sailed along without any definite course, listening to the lapping of the water, gazing into the blackness, holding his face up to the wind and thinking. At the most difficult times of his life nothing so restored his soul as these lonely wanderings. Stillness, stillness and solitude were what he needed in order to make the faintest, most obscure voices of his inner world sound clearly. This night his thoughts were of the future, of poverty and of Assol. It was unbearably difficult for him to leave her, if only for a short while; besides, he was afraid of resurrecting the abated pain. Perhaps, after signing up on a ship, he would again imagine that waiting for him in Kaperna was his beloved who had never died—and, returning, he would approach the house with the grief of lifeless expectation. Mary would never again come through the door. But he wanted to provide for Assol and, therefore, decided to do what his concern for her demanded he do.

When Longren returned the girl was not yet at home. Her early walks did not worry her father; this time, however, there was a trace of anxiety in his expectation. Pacing up and down, he turned to *suddenly* see Assol; having entered swiftly and soundlessly, she came up to him without a word and nearly frightened him by the brightness of her expression, which mirrored her excitement. It seemed that her second being had come to light—true being to which a person's eyes alone usually attest. She was silent and looked into Longren's face so strangely that he quickly inquired:

"Are you ill?"

She did not immediately reply. When the meaning of his words finally reached her inner ear Assol started, as a twig touched by a hand, and laughed a long, even peal of quietly triumphant laughter. She had to say something but, as always, she did not have to think of what it would be. She said:

"No. I'm well... Why are you looking at me like that? I'm happy. Really, I am, but it's because it's such a lovely day. What have you thought of? I can see by your look that you've thought of something."

"Whatever I may have thought of," Longren said, taking her on his lap, "I know you'll understand why I'm doing it. We've nothing to live on. I won't go on a long voyage again, but I'll sign on the mail-boat that plies between Kasset and Liss."

"Yes," she said from afar, making an effort to share his cares and worries, but aghast at being unable to stop feeling so gay. "That's awful. I'll be very lonely. Come back soon." Saying this, she blossomed out in an irrepressible smile. "And hurry, dear. I'll be waiting for you."

"Assol!" Longren said, cupping her face and turning it towards himself. "Tell me what's happened."

She felt she had to dispel his fears and, overcoming her jubilation, became gravely attentive, all save her eyes, which still sparkled with a new life.

"You're funny. Nothing at all. I was gathering nuts."

Longren would not have really believed this had he not been so taken up by his own thoughts. Their conversation then became matter-of-fact and detailed. The sailor told his daughter to pack his bag, enumerated all he would need and had some instructions for her:

"I'll be back in about ten days. You pawn my gun and stay at home. If anyone annoys you, say: 'Longren will be back soon.' Don't think or worry about me: nothing will happen to me."

He then had his dinner, kissed her soundly and, slinging the bag over his shoulder, went out to the road that led to town. Assol looked after him until he turned the bend and then went back into the house. She had many chores to do, but forgot all about them. She looked around with the interest of slight surprise, as if she were already *a stranger* to this house, so much a part of her for as far back as she could

recall that it seemed she had always carried its image within her, and which now appeared like one's native parts do when revisited after a lapse of time and from a different kind of life. But she felt there was something unbecoming in this rebuff of hers, something wrong. She sat down at the table at which Longren made his toys and tried to glue a rudder to a stern; as she looked at these objects she unwittingly imagined them in their true sizes, and zeal. All that had happened that morning once again rose up within her in trembling excitement, and a golden ring as large as the sun fell to her feet from across the sea.

She could not remain indoors, left the house and set out for Liss. She had no errand there at all, and did not know why she was going, yet could not but go. She met a man on the way who asked for directions; she explained all in detail to him, and the incident was immediately forgotten.

The long road slipped by as if she had been carrying a bird that had completely absorbed her tender attention. Approaching the town, she was distracted somewhat by the noise given off by its great circle, but it had no power over her as before, when, frightening and cowing her, it had made her a silent coward. She stood up to it. She passed along the circle of the boulevard leisurely, crossing the blue shadows of the trees, glancing up at the faces of passers-by trustingly and unselfconsciously, walking slowly and confidently. The observant had occasion during the day to note the stranger here, an unusual-looking girl who had passed through the motley crowd, lost in thought. In the square she held her hand out to the stream of water in the fountain, fingering the sparkling spray; then she sat down, rested a while and returned to the forest road. She traversed it in refreshed spirits, in a mood as peaceful and clear as a stream in evening that had finally exchanged the flashing mirrors of the day for the calm glow of the shadows. Approaching the village, she saw the selfsame coalman who had imagined his basket sprouting blossoms; he was standing beside his cart with two strange, sullen men who were covered with soot and dirt. Assol was very pleased.

"Hello, Phillip. What are you doing here?"

"Nothing, Midge. A wheel got loose. I fixed it, and now I'm having a smoke and talking to my friends. Where were you?"

Assol did not reply.

"You know, Phillip, I like you very much, and that's why you're the only one I'm telling this to. I'll be leaving soon. I'll probably be going away for good. Don't tell anyone, though."

"You mean you want to go away? Where to?" The coalman was so surprised he gaped, which made his beard still longer than it was.

"I don't know." Slowly, she took in the clearing, the elm under which the cart stood, the grass that was so green in the pink twilight, the silent, grimy coalmen and added after a pause: "I don't know. I don't know the day or the hour, or even where it'll be. I can't tell you any more. That's why I want to say goodbye, just in case. You've often given me a lift."

She took his huge, soot-blackened hand and more or less managed to give it a shake. The worker's face cracked in a stiff smile. The girl nodded, turned and walked off. She disappeared even before Phillip and his friends had a chance to turn their heads.

"Ain't it a wonder?" the coalman said. "How's a body to understand that? There's something about her today ... funny, like, I mean."

"You're right," the second man agreed. "You can't tell whether she was just saying that or trying to make us believe her. It's none of our business."

"It's none of our business," said the third and sighed.

Then the three of them got into the cart and, as the wheels clattered over the rocky road, disappeared in a cloud of dust.

VII
THE CRIMSON *SECRET*

It was a white hour of morning; a faint mist crowded with strange phantoms filled the great forest. An unnamed hunter, having just left his campfire, was making his way parallel to the river; the light of its airy emptiness glimmered through the trees, but the cautious hunter did not approach the river as he examined the fresh tracks of a bear that was heading for the mountains.

A sudden sound rushed through the trees with the unexpectedness of an alarming chance; it was the clarinet bursting into song. The musician, having come up on deck, played a passage full of sad and mournful repetition. The sound trembled like a voice concealing grief;

it rose, smiled in a sad trill and ended abruptly. A distant echo hummed the same melody faintly.

The hunter, marking the tracks with a broken twig, made his way to the water. The fog had not yet lifted; it obscured the silhouette of a large ship turning slowly out of the river. Its furled sails came to life, hanging down in festoons, coming unfurled and covering the masts with the helpless shields of their huge folds; he could hear voices and the sound of steps. The off-shore wind, attempting to blow, picked at the sails lazily; finally, the sun's warmth had the desired effect; the pressure of the wind increased, lifted the fog and streamed along the yards into the light crimson shapes so full of roses. Rosy shadows slipped along the white of the masts and rigging, and everything was white except the unfurled, full-blown sails which were the colour of true joy.

The hunter, staring from the bank, rubbed his eyes hard until he was finally convinced that what he was seeing was indeed so and not otherwise. The ship disappeared around a bend, but he still stood there, staring; then, shrugging, he went after his bear.

While the *Secret* sailed along the river, Gray stood at the helm, not trusting it to the helmsman, for he was afraid of shoals. Panten sat beside him, freshly-shaven and sulking resignedly, and wearing a new worsted suit and a shiny new cap. As before, he saw no connection between the crimson magnificence and Gray's intentions.

"Now," said Gray, "when my sails are glowing, the wind is fair and my heart is overflowing with joy that is greater than what an elephant experiences at the sight of a small bun, I shall try to attune you to my thoughts as I promised back in Liss. Please bear in mind that I don't consider you dull-witted or stubborn, no; you are an exemplary seaman and this means a lot. But you, as the great majority of others, hear the voices of all the simple truths through the thick glass of life; they shout, but you will not hear them. What I'm doing exists as an old-fashioned belief in the beautiful and unattainable, and what, actually, is as attainable and possible as a picnic. You will soon see a girl who cannot, who *must not marry otherwise* than in the manner I am following and which you are witnessing."

He related in short that which we know so well, concluding thus:

"You see how closely entwined here are fate, will and human nature; I'm going to the one who is waiting and can wait for me alone,

while I do not want any other but her, perhaps just because, thanks to her, I've come to understand a simple truth, namely: you must make so-called miracles come true yourself. When a person places the most importance on getting a treasured copper it's not hard to give him that copper, but when the soul cherishes the seed of an ardent plant—a miracle, make this miracle come true for it if you can.

"This person's soul will change and yours will, too. When the chief warden releases a prisoner of *his own free will*, when a billionaire gives his scribe a villa, a chorus girl and a safe, and when a jockey holds back his horse just once to let an unlucky horse pass him,—then everyone will understand how pleasant this is, how inexpressibly wonderful. But there are miracles of no less magnitude: a smile, merriment, forgiveness and ... the right word spoken opportunely. If one possesses this—one possesses all. As for me, our beginning—Assol's and mine—will forever remain to us in a crimson glow of sails, created by the depths of a heart that knows what love is. Have you understood me?"

"Yes, Captain." Panten cleared his throat and wiped his moustache with a neatly-folded, clean handkerchief. "I understand everything. You've touched my heart. I'll go below and tell Nicks I'm sorry I cursed him for sinking a pail yesterday. And I'll give him some tobacco—he lost his at cards yesterday."

Before Gray, who was somewhat surprised at the quick practical effect his words had had, was able to reply, Panten had clattered down the ladder and heaved a sigh in the distance. Gray looked up over his shoulder; the crimson sails billowed silently above him; the sun in their seams shone as a purple mist. The *Secret* was heading out to sea, moving away from the shore. There was no doubt in Gray's ringing soul—no dull pounding of anxiety, no bustle of small worries; as calmly as a sail was he straining towards a heavenly goal, his mind full of those thoughts which forestall words.

The puffs of smoke of a naval cruiser appeared on the horizon. The cruiser changed its course and, from a distance of half a mile, raised the signal that stood for "lie to".

"They won't shell us, boys," Gray said. "Don't worry! They simply can't believe their eyes."

He gave the order to lie to. Panten, shouting as if there were a fire,

brought the *Secret* out of the wind; the ship stopped, while a steam launch manned by a crew and lieutenant in white gloves sped towards them from the cruiser; the lieutenant, stepping aboard the ship, looked around in amazement and followed Gray to his cabin, from which he emerged an hour later, smiling as if he had just been promoted and, with an awkward wave of his hand, headed back to his blue cruiser. This time Gray had apparently been more successfull than he had with the unsophisticated Panten, since the cruiser, pausing shortly, blasted the horizon with a mighty salvo whose swift bursts of smoke, ripping through the air in great, flashing balls, furled away over the still waters. All day long there was an air of half-festive bewilderment on board the cruiser; the mood was definitely not official, it was one of awe—under the sign of love, of which there was talk everywhere,—from the officers' mess to the engine room; the watch on duty in the torpedo section asked a passing sailor:

"How'd you get married, Tom?"

"I caught her by the skirt when she tried to escape through the window," Tom said and twirled his moustache proudly.

For some time after the *Secret* plied the empty sea, out of sight of the shore; towards noon they sighted the distant shore. Gray lifted his telescope and trained it on Kaperna. If not for a row of roofs, he would have spotted Assol sitting over a book by the window in one of the houses. She was reading; a small greenish beetle was crawling along the page, stopping and rising up on its front legs, looking very independent and tame. It had already been blown peevishly onto the window-sill twice, from whence it had reappeared as trustingly and unafraid as if it had had something to say. This time it managed to get nearly as far as the girl's hand which was holding the corner of the page; here it got stuck on the word "look", hesitated as if awaiting a new squall and, indeed, barely escaped trouble, since Assol had already exclaimed: "Oh! That ... silly bug!"—and was about to blow the visitor right into the grass when a chance shifting of her eyes from one rooftop to another revealed to her in the blue strip of sea at the end of the street a white ship with crimson sails.

She started visibly, leaned back and froze; then she jumped up, her heart sinking dizzily, and burst into uncontrollable tears of inspired shock. Meanwhile, the *Secret* was rounding a small cape, its port side

towards the shore; soft music wafted over the light-blue hollow, coming from the white deck beneath the crimson silk; the music of a lilting melody expressed not too successfully by the well-known words: "Fill, fill up your glasses—and let us drink to love..." In its simplicity, exulting, excitement unfurled and rumbled.

Unmindful of how she had left the house, Assol ran towards the sea, caught up by the irresistible wind of events; she stopped at the very first corner, nearly bereft of strength; her knees buckled, her breath came in gasps and consciousness hung by a thread. Beside herself from fear of losing her determination, she stamped her foot and ran on. Every now and then a roof or a fence would hide the crimson sails from view; then, fearful lest they had disappeared like some ordinary mirage, she would hurry to pass the tormenting obstacle and, sighting the ship once again, would stop to heave a sigh of relief.

Meanwhile, there was such commotion, such an uproar and such excitement in Kaperna as was comparable to the effect of the famous earthquakes. Never before had a large ship approached this shore; the ship had the very same sails whose colour sounded like a taunt; now they were blazing brightly and incontestably with the innocence of a fact that refutes all the laws of being and common sense. Men, women and children were racing helter-skelter towards the shore; the inhabitants shouted to each other over their fences, bumped into each other, howled and tumbled; soon a crowd had gathered at the water's edge, and into the crowd Assol rushed.

As long as she was not there her name was tossed around with a nervous and sullen tenseness, with hateful fear. The men did most of the talking; the thunderstruck women sobbed in a choked, snake-like hissing, but if one did begin to rattle—the poison rose to her head. The moment Assol appeared everyone became silent, everyone moved away from her in fear, and she remained alone on the empty stretch of hot sand, at a loss, shamed and happy, with a face no less crimson than her miracle, helplessly stretching her hands towards the tall ship.

A rowboat manned by bronzed oarsmen detached itself from the ship; among them stood he whom she now felt she had known, had dimly recalled since childhood. He was looking at her with a smile which warmed and beckoned. But thousands of last-stand, silly fears gripped Assol; deathly afraid of everything—an error, misunderstand-

ing, some mysterious or evil hindrance—she plunged waistdeep into the warm undulation of the waves, shouting: "I'm here, I'm here! It's me!"

Then Zimmer raised his bow—and the very same melody struck the nerves of the crowd, but this time it was a full-voiced, triumphant choir. From excitement, the motion of the clouds and waves, the glitter of the water and the distance the girl was hardly able to discern what was moving: she herself, the ship or the rowboat,—everything was moving, spinning and falling.

But an oar slashed the water next to her; she raised her head. Gray bent down, and her hands gripped his belt. Assol shut her eyes tight; then she opened them quickly, smiled boldly into his beaming face and said breathlessly:

"Just as I imagined you."

"And you, too, my dear!" Gray said, lifting his wet treasure from the water. "I've come at last. Do you recognize me?"

She nodded, holding onto his belt, trembling with a reborn soul and eyes shut quiveringly tight. Happiness was as a soft kitten curled up inside of her. When Assol decided to open her eyes the rocking of the rowboat, the sparkle of the waves, the huge, approaching, moving side of the *Secret*—all was a dream, where the light and the water bobbed and spun like sun-spots cavorting on a sunshine-streaked wall. She did not remember how she was carried up the gangplank in Gray's strong arms. The deck, covered and draped with rugs, engulfed by the crimson splashing of the sails, was like a heavenly garden. And soon Assol saw that she was in a cabin—in a room than which nothing could be better.

Then from above, rending and absorbing the heart in its triumphant cry, once again the thunderous music crashed. Once again Assol shut her eyes, fearful lest all this disappear if she were to look. Gray took her hands and, knowing now where safety lay, she buried her tear-stained face on the breast of her beloved, who had appeared so miraculously. Gently, but with a smile, for he, too, was overwhelmed and amazed by the coming of the inexpressible, precious minute, inaccessible to anyone else, Gray tilted up this face that had haunted him for so long, and the eyes of the girl finally opened wide. All that was best in a person was in them.

"Will you take my Longren with us?" she said.

"Yes." And he kissed her so passionately after saying this firm "yes" that she laughed delightedly.

We shall leave them now, knowing that they should be alone. There are many words in the many languages and dialects of the world, but none of them can even faintly convey that which they said to each other that day.

Meanwhile, up on deck, by the mainmast the entire crew waited at the worm-eaten cask with the top knocked off to reveal the hundred-year old dark magnificence. Atwood stood by; Panten sat as primly blissful as a newborn babe. Gray came up on deck, signalled to the orchestra and, removing his cap, was the first to dip a glass, to the accompaniment of the golden horns, into the sacred wine.

"There..." he said, when he had drunk and then tossed down his glass. "Now drink. Everybody, drink! Anyone who doesn't drink is my enemy."

He did not have to repeat his words. As the *Secret* proceeded at full speed, under full sail, away from Kaperna, which had been struck dumb forever, the jostling around the cask was greater than anything in this manner that occurs at great fetes.

"How did you like it?" Gray asked Letika.

"Captain," the sailor said, searching for the right words, "I don't know whether it liked me, but I'll have to think over my impressions. Beehive and orchard!"

"What?"

"I mean it's like having a beehive and an orchard put into my mouth. Be happy, Captain. And may she whom I will call 'the best cargo', the *Secret*'s best prize, be happy, too!"

When dawn broke the following morning the ship was far from Kaperna. Part of the crew were asleep where they had stretched out on deck, overcome by Gray's wine; only the helmsman, the watch and a thoughtful and tipsy Zimmer who sat near the prow with his chin resting on the finger-board of his cello were up. He sat there, drawing his bow across the strings softly, making them speak in a magic, heavenly voice, and was thinking of happiness.

1920-1921



THE SNAKE

"Ned Garlan's heirs", as their acquaintances jokingly nicknamed them, were a group of seven young students, joint owners of a motor boat given to them by Garlan who had died of tuberculosis in Switzerland.

In the middle of July the group made its first trip out. They set off for the shore of Lake Snark to "live in the wilds".

An eighth person was invited—Colbert, whose unrequited love for one of the three girls going on the trip—Joy Tavis—had become very well-known in the university a year ago, and had often given rise to comment.

From the age of sixteen till this day Joy Tavis had inflicted wound after wound, and as she did not know how to heal them or did not wish to, they healed quite quickly by themselves without medical help. Colbert was wounded more seriously than others and did not conceal it.

He had proposed to Joy three times, provoking in her first laughter, then the suggestion to remain "friends", and finally, unconcealed annoyance. She didn't like him. She was afraid of tall, serious men who stared fixedly at her and became miserable and lovesick. At the mere thought that a man of such extreme restraint might become her husband, she was seized by an outburst of fiery, vengeful anger against any unseen coercion which would force her into such a position.

But Colbert did not make a nuisance of himself, and she did not avoid him, first asking for his word that he would not propose to her any more. He obeyed and began to behave as if he had never disturbed her with the simple words: "Be my wife, Joy!"

On the third day of "living in the wilds", Joy felt an urge to go into the forest, and she invited Colbert to accompany her, vaguely hoping that something would make him forgo his stony promise not to propose to her any more. For three months now no one had spoken to her of love. She yearned for some small incident which would arouse the fleeting and totally harmless mood reminiscent of love. As Colbert walked behind her, she felt as if there were advancing at her back a wall which yearned timidly to fall down. She only had to guess the

right moment to move to one side, and let the wall crash down on to open ground.

They came out into a clearing of high grass, scattered with boulders and sat down on them, each thinking his own thoughts.

Colbert remarked that when they had had a rest, they ought to go back.

"Are you glad things between us have become uncomplicated?" said Joy after a silence.

"That question's already been fully discussed, I think," answered Colbert warily, not without reason suspecting a trap. "I've given you my word. But if..."

"No," Joy interrupted. "I've already forbidden you and you gave me your word. Surely you don't want to break your promise?"

"I would rather die," retorted Colbert seriously, "than break a promise I made you. You needn't worry."

Vexed, Joy glanced at him; he sat smiling so submissively and sadly that her vexation became indignation. Her scheme had failed.

To go further meant to get herself into a ridiculous position. For a while she still hoped that Colbert would not be able to restrain himself and would blurt something out, but he only rolled a stem of grass pensively between his palms. Joy suddenly felt that this man, by his whole appearance, his resolution and firmness, was teaching her a lesson, and she was seized by so strong a feeling of enmity towards him that she could not stop herself from saying caustically:

"You gave your word out of cowardice. It's safer to sit and keep quiet, isn't it?"

"Joy," said Colbert, alarmed, "the heat must've affected you. Let's go back, you'll be in the shade there!"

Joy stood up. She suddenly felt an urge to clutch at his thick russet hair and to shake this heavy head which didn't understand the meaning of the game. He didn't wish to respond to her capricious mood. Offended and deeply agitated, the girl looked fixedly at the ground under her feet, biting her lip. Something flashing in the rustling grass caught her eye. "Look, a lizard!"

Colbert's push almost knocked her over. Reeling, she kept her feet with difficulty. Waving his arms, Colbert was stamping on something in the grass, then squatted down and carefully picked up by the

middle of its body a small snake which hung down by its two ends, head and tail, from his fingers.

"Did you see it?" he said in alarm, looking into Joy's angry face. "Forgive me if I pushed you too hard. It's a bronze snake! One of the most dangerous! Women nearly always take snakes for lizards. If you're bitten by a bronze snake, you die in three minutes."

Joy came nearer.

"Is it dead?"

"Yes," Colbert replied, flinging the snake down and picking it up again.

In Joy's opinion it was brave to pick up a dead snake, and she didn't wish to be outdone by Colbert. Taking the snake from him, she wound it round her left wrist, so that it made a sort of bracelet. Lying on Joy's dark skin, the little snake, crushed in several places by Colbert's heel, was shot with the colour of old gold.

"Drop it, drop it!" Colbert shouted suddenly.

He did not have time to say that over the lifeless body had passed a barely noticeable spasm. The snake had revived for an instant and, feeling the alien warmth of human flesh, opened its mouth and bit Joy's hand. This effort completely destroyed it. Seizing the snake by the head, Colbert crushed it so much that he tore it, then flung the remains of its body from Joy's wrist and noticed two drops of blood. The meaning of them was as clear to him as if someone had shouted it.

"Don't lose your head!" he said. "Just remember death's right here!"

His body shuddered with the trembling which he tried to control. Joy looked helplessly at her bitten wrist. She felt pain and loathing, but her imagination did not work as quickly as Colbert's, and realization of the end had not yet stunned her. But Colbert's abruptness and his orders put her in possession of all her independence which felt endangered by the great service Colbert was about to render her.

"Let go," she said, breathing heavily. "I'll do it myself. Give me the knife."

At such moments time is more valuable than life. Opening the knife, Colbert tried to pull the girl down so as to perform the operation. At the same time he quickly ran his tongue over his gums and palate to

see whether he had any scratches in his mouth.

"I've got to suck the poison out!" he shouted. "There's nothing else for it! Joy, don't argue!"

Silently, gritting her teeth, she struggled with him, preferring in her strange frenzy to die rather than receive life from his hands. She knew perfectly well what that must entail. Colbert now had a chance of becoming her husband, and without words, without thoughts, she instinctively realized this and fought desperately in his arms. Beside himself, Colbert dragged her over to a tree with a divided trunk. Forcing her arm through the gap and tearing her skin as he did so, he went round to the other side. Here he grasped Joy by the hand. Now her arm was gripped in a vice.

Powerfully squeezing this arm by the elbow—this arm which so hated him—squeezing so hard that his great strength made Joy's nails turn blue, Colbert cut the flesh deeply by the bite, put his lips to the wound and filled his mouth with blood. Spitting it out, he did this again and, recovering his breath, for a third time sucked the blood of the girl he loved. Having jerked her arm a couple of times, Joy finally became quiet, and stood leaning against the other side of the tree. Fear, humiliation and rage had covered her face with angry tears. She kept on repeating:

"Colbert, all the same I'll never be your wife. Let me go!"

Colbert was silent. Letting her hand go at last, he understood what she was saying and replied:

"You'll be someone's wife, that's the main thing. And to be a wife, you've got to be alive."

His moustache and chin were covered in blood and he wiped them with a hand that was red with blood too.

Gloomily stretching out her torn, wounded arm, Joy pressed a handkerchief to the cut. Both were breathing heavily as if they had run a long way. Finally, tearing the handkerchief, Joy bandaged her arm. Colbert was looking at his watch.

"That's five minutes gone. I think it's all right now."

Standing with her back towards him, Joy did not reply. When she turned round, he was no longer in the clearing.

Astonished, the girl called "Colbert!" Not forgiving him for anything and still in the grip of her inner resistance over which

Colbert had finally triumphed, she followed the track of trampled grass and, glancing into the bushes, stopped.

Colbert lay flat on his back, his face black and swollen. He was a completely different man. His eyes were puffy and his moustache and mouth, smeared with Joy's blood, revealed all the horror from which he had saved his beloved. This repulsive, poisoned face finally made Joy take fright, for she saw her own end, now averted, in all its unforgettable horror, and she broke into a run, shouting: "Help, I'm dying!"

But it was too late, for she was saved.

1926



HIS FATHER'S WRATH*

On the eve of Baring's return from a long journey, his son, little Tom Baring, was the victim of an onslaught by his Aunt Cornelia and her husband, Uncle Carl.

Tom had been blowing soap bubbles in the gloomy library. He had committed much worse crimes: for instance, burning a hole in the yellow curtains with a magnifying glass, peeping at the illustrations to the *Decameron* and getting into a fight with a neighbour's son; but the soap bubbles upset Cornelia particularly. The spacious, prim house could not tolerate such frivolity, and Uncle Carl gravely confiscated the dish of soap while Aunt Cornelia took the glass pipe.

Cornelia railed a long time warning Tom about the dreadful fate in store for naughty boys: they become criminals or tramps. Concluding her lecture, she said:

"Beware of your father's wrath! As soon as my brother arrives, I shall tell him all about your behaviour and his wrath will descend on you in all its fury."

Uncle Carl bent down, his hands on his hips, and added:

"His wrath will be awful."

When they had gone out, Tom ensconced himself in the big armchair and tried to imagine what he was in for. True, Carl and Cornelia always used high-flown language, but the repeated mention of his father's "wrath" bothered Tom a great deal. To have asked his aunt or uncle what wrath was would have meant showing himself up as a coward. Tom did not want to give them that satisfaction.

After thinking it over for a while, Tom climbed down from the armchair and went with dignity into the garden, hoping to meet someone who could give him an explanation.

Oscar Monk, writer and a relative of Cornelia's, was lying in the shade of an oak-tree and reading a newspaper.

Tom stole up to him in the silent Indian fashion and yelled:

"Ugh!"

Monk put aside his paper, held the little boy round the knees and drew him closer.

"All's quiet on the Orinoco," he said. "The Hurons have gone into the prairie."

But Tom was feeling miserable and did not join in the game.

"You don't happen to know what the wrath is, do you?" he asked glumly. "Don't tell anyone I've been talking to you about it."

"The wrath?"

"Yes, father's wrath. He's coming back tomorrow, and he's bringing the wrath with him. Auntie's going to tell tales about me blowing bubbles and burning a hole. The hole was only a little one, but I ... I don't want the wrath to know about it."

"Aha, so that's it!" said Monk with a wild laugh Tom could not understand, but that made him recoil three paces. "Yes, your father's wrath doesn't look very nice. It's a monster, and a very rare one. Has four arms and four legs. Runs fast. Slant-eyed. Nasty disposition. Weird creature."

Tom felt unhappy and backed away, staring in bewilderment at Monk, who could so cheerfully describe this terrible beast. He lost all desire to question anyone else and wandered for some time down the avenues until he saw the little girl from next door, eight-year-old Molly. He ran to her to tell her his troubles, but as soon as she saw Tom, she ran away. She had not been allowed to play with him since the day when they had shot arrows at the greenhouse together. The ringleader, as always in such cases, was believed to have been Tom, although it was Molly who had encouraged him to "have a try" and hit the window-frame.

Moved by feelings of attachment and worship for that skinny, curly-haired little person, Tom plunged straight through the shrubbery, getting his face badly scratched, but he failed to catch up with the girl and, wiping away the tears of distress, he went back home.

After laying the table for breakfast, the maid went out. Tom noticed a big decanter full of golden wine and remembered that Captain Kydd (from the book, *The Pirates of the Coast*) had to drink rum on a desert island in total and revolting solitude.

Tom was very fond of Kydd, and so, climbing on to the table, he poured out a glass of wine, muttering:

"Your health, Captain. I have arrived on a steamer to rescue you. Never fear, we shall find your daughter."

Tom had only just had a sip of the wine when Cornelia came in, took the drunkard off the chair and silently but good-naturedly dealt him three smacks on the usual place. Then the infuriated old woman let out a shriek and the criminal, wriggling out of her grasp, fled into the garden where he took refuge under the wooden summer-house floor.

He realised that he was finished. All his hopes were pinned on his father's intercession with the wrath.

Of his father, Tom could only remember that he had a black moustache and a big warm hand in which Tom could hide his whole face. He didn't remember his mother.

He sat and sighed, trying to imagine what would happen when the wrath was let out of its cage.

In Tom's opinion, a cage was necessary for the monster. He took his bow out of a corner together with the two arrows which he had made himself, but he suddenly doubted the effectiveness of such a weapon. He crawled out from under the summer-house and penetrated secretly across the terrace into Uncle Carl's study. There were pistols and guns on the wall in there.

Tom knew they weren't loaded—he had heard it said so many times; but he hoped to steal some powder from the gardener's son. A pebble would do as a bullet. He clambered up on to the back of the settee and was just beginning to take down an enormous pistol with a copper barrel, when Uncle Carl came in, gave a whistle of astonishment and gripped the boy with stiff fingers by the back of the collar. Tom wrenched himself free, fell off the settee and bumped his knee.

He rose unsteadily to his feet and, hanging his head, glumly fixed his eyes on Uncle's enormous shoes.

"Tell me, Tom," began Uncle, "is it worthy of you, the son of Harold Baring, to infiltrate secretly and with felonious intent into this study, which has never witnessed anything disgraceful before? Have you thought about what you are doing?"

"I have," said Tom. "Uncle, I needed a pistol. I don't want to surrender without a fight. Your wrath, which is coming with father, will only get me dead. I shall not yield to it alive."

Uncle Carl was silent for a moment, made a noise like a stifled snort, and went to the window, where be stood filling his pipe with tobacco. When he had finished, he turned round, and his expression

was like the one Tom had seen on Monk's face earlier.

"I'm going to lock you in here and leave you without breakfast," said Uncle Carl, calmly pausing in the study doorway. "Stay where you are and listen to the lock click when I close the door. That's how the wrath clicks its teeth. Don't you dare touch anything."

So saying, he went out and, turning the key in the lock so that it clicked twice, he took it out and put it in his pocket.

Tom promptly applied his eye to the keyhole. Seeing that Uncle had gone round the corner, he opened the window, crawled out on to the roof of a shed, and jumped down it on to a flower-bed, flattening a clump of zinnias. He was moved by the cold desperation of the doomed. He wanted to flee into the forest, dig himself a hidey-hole and live there on berries and flowers until he succeeded in finding a buried treasure of gold and weapons.

So thinking, Tom skulked along the fence and saw through the railings a car travelling along the road to Uncle Carl's house. Next to an elderly black-haired man, sat a fair-haired young woman. Behind this car sped another, loaded with boxes and trunks.

Tom barely had time to take this in before the cars turned off into the gateway and the sound of engines stopped.

A vague recollection of the big hand in which he could hide his whole face made the boy pause and then rush back home as fast as his legs could carry him. "Is that really my father?" he thought, running straight over the flower-beds and forgetting that he had escaped from the study in search of consolation and mercy.

Tom entered by the back door and went through all the rooms into the entrance hall. His doubts vanished. Cornelia, Carl, Monk, the maid and the manservant were all there making a fuss of the tall man with the black moustache and his lady companion.

"Yes," Baring was saying, "I left a day earlier to see the little boy sooner. But where is he? I can't see him."

"I'll fetch him," said Carl.

"I've come myself," said Tom, squeezing through between Cornelia and the fat maid.

Baring frowned, sighed briefly and, lifting his son up, kissed him on his scratched cheek.

Uncle Carl's eyes bulged.

"But you were being punished! You were locked in!"

"He's pardoned under an amnesty today," said Baring, leading the boy to the young woman.

"Is this the wrath?" wondered Tom. "Hardly. Doesn't look like it."

"She is going to be your mother," said Baring. "Be a mother to this little fool, Kate."

"We shall play games together," said a warm voice so close to his ear that it tickled.

He clutched her hand and, believing his father, looked into her big blue eyes. There was nothing here to remind him of Carl and Cornelia. Now he could be sure of his breakfast.

He was seized and taken away for a wash. However, Tom's mind was not entirely at ease because he knew Carl and Cornelia only too well. They were always as good as their word and they were bound to be in cahoots with the wrath by this time. Availing himself of the maid's absence—she had gone to change the towel—Tom rushed to the room that he knew had been prepared for his father.

He knew that the wrath was in there. It was locked in, quietly biding its time and waiting to be let out.

Tom put his eyes to the keyhole but could not see anything. The floor was covered with rolls of carpeting, furs and packing cases wrapped in matting. Several trunks, including two with their lids opened, gave an unusual look to the big room which had been furnished with all the correct stodginess of the tranquil and unchanging life.

Frightened of his mission, but almost sick with the desire to shed the oppressive burden on his heart, Tom opened the door and went in. To his relief, there was a real revolver lying on the bed. He knew nothing about these weapons in life; he only knew from books what had to be squeezed to make them fire. Tom picked up the Browning and, holding it in his outstretched hands, plucked up courage and walked to the open trunk.

Then he saw the wrath.

It was about two quarters high, a white, four-handed monster, glaring at him from inside the trunk with dreadful slanting eyes.

Tom shrieked and squeezed what had to be squeezed.

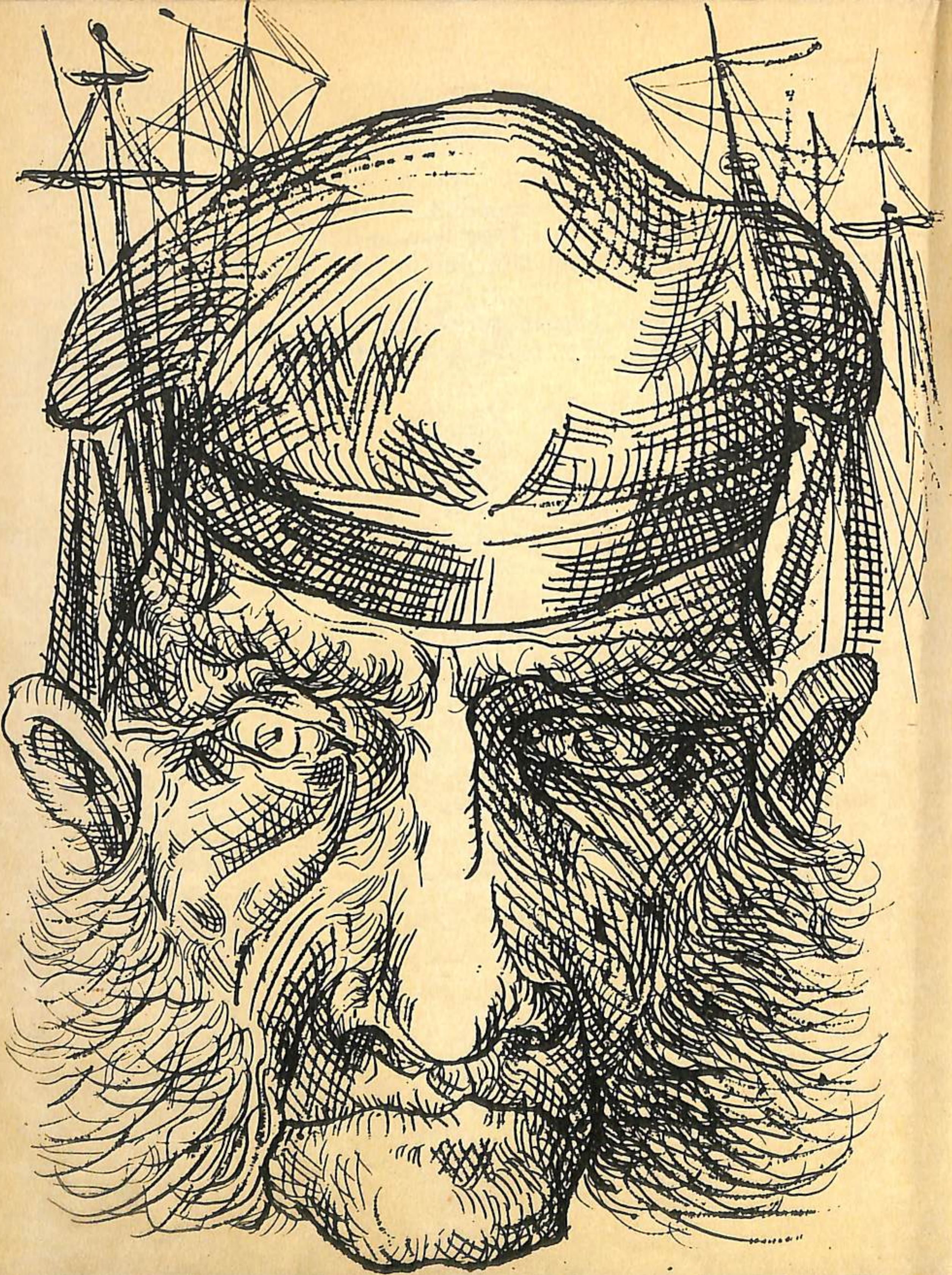
The trunk seemed to explode. Fragments of porcelain flew out of it,

impinging on the window and the tables. Tom sat down on the floor, gripping the revolver, which was still firing. He threw it aside and flung himself, sobbing, into the arms of Baring who, white as a sheet, had just rushed in with Carl and Cornelia.

"I've killed your wrath!" he shouted in delight and shock. "I've shot it! It can't touch anyone now! I didn't do anything wrong! I burnt a hole, and I drank rum with Kydd, but I didn't want the wrath!"

"There, there, Tom," said Baring, hugging his son's trembled body with a sigh of relief. "I know all about it, my dear little Tom... Poor old fellow!"

1928



THE PORT COMMANDANT

I

It was already dark when the Commandant mounted the brightly illuminated ladder of the freighter the *Record*. He was a person of seventy-two and very popular in the harbour—an erect, slightly-built old man. His little face, as wrinkled as a dried pear, was meticulously shaven. Grey sideburns stuck out like the fins of a fish; from under the grey visors of his brows, small blue eyes glittered in a pleasant smile. In the bright electric light the Commandant's sailor's cap, brown pea-jacket, white trousers, blue tie, and cheap cane evidenced their shabbiness, which no amount of assiduous mending could remove from them. The Commandant's yellow boots, which had split twenty-two times, had just as often been sewn together with thread or reinforced with bits of wire. A piece of tightly sewn-on coloured silk peered from the breast pocket of his jacket.

Having thoughtfully touched his collar and then wriggled his shoulders in order to overcome a recalcitrance on the part of his suspenders, the old man stopped before the officer of the watch and abruptly spread out his arms, tilting his head to one side.

"Tom Laston!" exclaimed the Commandant in a cheerful, tremulous voice. "I just knew that on this fine ship I would see you again, dreaming of your dear Betsy, who is there ... far away. Thunder and lightning! I hope that the voyage is going well?"

"Cutgey!" Laston shouted into the distance. "The Commandant's come. What now?"

"Throw him out on his ear!" came the firm reply.

The old man's glance conveyed pleading, bewilderment, and skittishness. His cane went up and down, like a dog's tail when it is trying to grasp its master's mood.

"Now really, why be so hard on him?" responded Laston, good-naturedly clapping the old man on the shoulder, which caused the Commandant to squat down as though he were collapsible. "I think, Cutgey, that you'll want to say hello to him. Don't be afraid, Commandant, Cutgey's joking."

"Who's joking?" said Cutgey, the chief stoker, a bony and broad-

shouldered man, as he walked up to them. "Whenever you arrive in Gerton, the Commandant's sure to turn up. It's gotten tiresome. You ought to go to bed, old man."

"I've just come from the *Abraham Repp,*" the old man began to babble, trying not to hear the stoker's unpleasant words. "Everything's in order there. They had a good run and at dawn the *Repp* is sailing away. I drank coffee and played checkers with the bosun Tolby. A wonderful fellow! How are you, Cutgey? I hope that everything's in order? Your esteemed family?"

"Have a smoke," said Cutgey and thrust a black cigarette onto the old man. "Hold it tightly, or else you'll drop it."

"Ah, here's Mr. Captain!" the Commandant cried out, excitedly adjusting his jacket and running up to the captain, who was off to the theatre with his wife. "Good evening, Mr. Captain! And good evening, most esteemed ... hm... The evening is so nice that one wants to stroll along the esplanade and listen to the wonderful music. How are you? I hope that all's in order? You haven't had to ride out a storm, have you? Your health ... is it excellent?"

"Oh, it's you, Tils," said Captain Henry Halton, coming to a stop; he was a tall man of about thirty-five with a large, weather-beaten face. "You're still holding out—very good! I'm glad to see you. However, we're in a hurry, and so take this dollar and get yourself over to Butler in the galley; gab for a bit there. All the best. Mary, this is the Commandant."

"Is that who you are?" smiled the young woman. " 'The Port Commandant'? I've heard about you."

"They all know me!" Tils let out a loud, old man's cackle, holding the cigarette in one hand and the dollar and the cane in the other. "Sailors are great people, and our likings, I hope, are mutual. I must say that I adore sailors. I'm drawn to a ship's deck ... like ... like ... like..."

Not waiting to hear the rest, the captain took his wife ashore, while Tils politely lifted his cap after them and turned to Laston:

"A fine fellow, your captain! A real whale of a chap. From his head to his toes."

Here it must be explained that the Commandant (this was his nickname) was known positively everywhere in the harbour, from the

most disreputable inn to the customs bureau. Tils had worked his entire life as a clerk in the warehouse of a large private firm, but was finally dismissed on grounds that resulted from his venerable age. Since then he had been supported by his widowed sister, with whom he lived—the childless, fifty-year-old Rebecca Bartels.

Epilepsy had kept Tils from becoming a sailor, and although attacks of it ceased as he became old, he remained a sailor only in his imagination. In the morning his sister would shove a large sandwich into the pocket of his jacket and give him ten cents for odd expenses; brandishing a cane, the Commandant would begin his rounds of the port. He did not pursue any mercenary ends; he had been attracted to ships and sailors from childhood—ever since, while still in his mother's arms, he had stretched out his little hands towards the vision of sails descending along the blue wall of the sea.

After he had lit up the cigarette with a trembling, dried-out hand, the Commandant set out with small regular steps for the galley, where the cook, catching sight of his brows and sideburns, burst into loud laughter.

"I knew that you'd show up, Tils," he said finally, moving a stool towards him and filling a mug with coffee from the pot. "Where've you been? You must've missed the *Stella*; it's sitting beyond the oil jetty, opposite the factory. This very minute they're playing cards and drinking over there."

"Not so fast, not so fast, esteemed Peter Butler," Tils answered with a sigh and, moving the stool up to the table, sat down, with his hands folded on the crook of his cane. "How is your esteemed health? Was it a good run? Your esteemed spouse, I hope, is calmly awaiting your return? Hm... I've already been on the *Stella*. They hadn't yet begun playing then, but had just sent the supercargo to buy a pack of cards. Yes. But I soon went away, you know, because there are two individuals there who treat me ... well, yes ... not amicably. They said that I'm an importunate old loafer and that... Naturally I got upset and couldn't express to them my love of everything ... of gallant sailors ... of the deck... But I always have that, and you know..."

Tils became sad and gave a sob. Butler reached into a locker and banged a small bottle of pineapple liqueur on the table.

"An old salt like you has to down a glassful," said Butler. "Right?

Let's drink up and forget those scoundrels. Your health! My health! Allo! Hup!"

Butler tossed a half cup of the drink into his fleshy mouth, wiped his lower lip with his thumb, and stared concentratedly at Tils, who, when he had slowly sucked in his glassful, made a movement with his lips, as though he wanted to say "a-am". After wiping his watering eyes and blowing his nose, Tils began to pull on the extinguished cigarette.

"Another one?"

"No thanks. Maybe later. Thunder and lightning! The *Stella* is a good ship, very good," said Tils, and his head gave a feeble shake with each word. "They launched her in 1901. Cherley no longer works on the *Siren*; I saw him yesterday in Marley's hotel. 'I'll have a rest,' he says. 'The fact is,' says Cherley, 'I have a bone to pick with the firm; they haven't paid me in full.' Today I was in the Black Bull; I stopped off to ask what's what. Everything's fine. Rumper moved his tavern to the other corner, because that building was sold for a store. Watson simply can't get a pension; how awful! He drinks, let lightning strike me, he drinks wonderfully, like a camel or a sea serpent. It's pleasant to watch. He'll take a mug and look at it. 'In the Philippines,' says Watson, 'yes,' he says, 'there used to be some going on. It's nice,' he says, 'in Jamaica.' The *Royal Star* sank. They're saying that it ran into a cyclone. Balls of fire! Did you know Simon Legree? The pirate? Simon Legree was a pirate, and he once entertained me after ... a certain affair. This is what he said: 'They wouldn't have sunk the *Notch*,' he says, 'if the Devil himself hadn't helped them.' Then he began to swear so that everyone grew thoughtful. He was a fine man, that Legree, I'll say it for him! Thunder and lightning! Then I said to him: 'You know what, Legree, take me on. For boardings! Hip, hip, hurray! For life and death!' But he was busy with something and didn't listen. Then the *Notch* would not be lost. When I'm about even the Devil..."

"Of course, Commandant," said Laston, appearing in the galley's doors, "you would have made them shape up."

"Naturally," confirmed Tils. "Very much so indeed. Naturally."

When he had drunk another glass Tils became animated. Evidently, he had no intention of going away soon and began to enumerate all

kinds of meetings, mixing up his own thoughts with what he had heard and seen during his long life. He was not drunk, but only garrulous, and felt like a robust young man ready to sail to the ends of the earth. However, he had already twice called the cook Señor Ribeira, taking him for the chief mechanic on the steamship *Grenel,* and had called Laston Herr Bauman, likewise confusing him with the bosun of the schooner *Bolivia*, and then the cook decided that it was time to send the Commandant away. There was only one method of doing this, but the Commandant would submit to it without protest. With a wink at the cook Laston said:

"Well, Commandant, go help our lads moor to the *Pilgrim*. In a minute we'll be changing moorings."

Tils shrank back and slowly glanced at Laston from under his brows; then he nervously straightened his collar.

"I know the *Pilgrim,*" Tils began to babble in a pathetic voice, "it's a very good ship. In 1914 two holes on the reefs near Cape Hunger ... speed of twelve knots... Naturally."

"Get going, Tils; give our lads a hand," said the cook in mock seriousness.

The Commandant slowly pulled down the peak of his cap and stood up, tearing himself away from stool with difficulty. The clearly-imagined thickness of the massive cables drove the old man's jingling tipsiness out of his head; he became cold and tired.

"I'd better go home," said Tils, swiftly smiling at Butler and Laston, who, with their arms folded on their chests and their eyes half-closed, sat in front of him importantly. "Yes, I must, since I promised not to stay away later than eight. Make the mooring, lads, rock your trough onto the *Pilgrim*. Ha-ha! Have a good game. I'm off..."

"This is a pretty kettle of fish," exclaimed Butler. "You're off! Really, Commandant, the lads and the bosun are returning in a minute; come on now, help us."

"No, no, no. I must, I must be going," Tils hastened, "because I promised, you understand, to come earlier."

"And where are you going now?" said the young sailor Schenk as he came in.

"Hello, young man! Was the voyage good? The health of your

esteemed..."

"...Mother, lest you be mistaken—she's excellent. But that's beside the point. If you want, drop by the Sea Club. A girl named Peggy Scotter works at the buffet there."

"Peggy Scotter?" mumbled Tils, reviving somewhat and not even frightened any more of the *Record*'s thick cables. "Of course I know her. An excellent girl, I swear, may they shoot me in the heart! I know her, I tell you."

"Then tell her that her friend Willy Brant died of the plague in Hainaut a month ago. The *Cock's Comb* just came in; a sailor from it was in the Heureka, where our fellows were sitting, and told us about it. Who is to tell her? Nobody. Everyone's afraid. How can one tell her about this? She'll begin crying. But you can do it, Tils. You're a steadfast person and old like an hour-glass; you know how to do things. Isn't that right?"

"That's right," said Laston resolutely, moving his foot.

"That's right," Butler agreed after a short silence.

"Just be sure you do it straight off. Don't torture her with suspense. Don't put your tail between your legs," instructed Schenk.

"Yes, it is much worse when you drag it out," Butler confirmed. "Out with it and off you go."

Lips pursed, the old man lowered his head. The sailors' breathing—measured and heavy, as though at work—was alone audible.

"The fact of the matter is that from you," Schenk resumed, "it will be all the same as the whisper of a tree, or like the ticking of a clock: 'Brant-died-of-the-plague-in-Hai-naut.' It's easier that way. And if I go, it will be unseemly, you know. I'll have to get drunk for such an occasion."

"Yes, straight off," Tils shouted hoarsely and stamped his foot. "Boldly and courageously. The heart of that devil of a wench is steel. A real sea hoof. I promise you, Schenk, and you, Butler, and you, Laston. I'll do it at once."

II

Peggy Scotter was busy at the tea buffet in the lower hall of the club, to the right of the vestibule. She was a stocky but well-proportioned girl, with freckles and a snub nose; her grey eyes had a serious and questioning look, while her dark-red hair, fastened on the back of her neck with a dozen strong pins, shone like well-polished bronze.

When for the tenth time her helper had begun to study the cut of her boss's sleeve, which was trimmed with lace, Peggy caught sight of Tils. He approached the buffet in a semi-circle, often stopping and politely bowing to the customers whom he knew.

"Look, Melly, the Commandant's come," said Peggy, sorting the biscuits on a large earthenware plate. "He's heading over here. Well, well, get a move on, you old chatterbox!"

Bowing to Peggy while still some distance away, Tils stepped right up to the counter. Peggy looked at him inquiring with her glance about old age and the labours of the day and she smiled at his solemnly mysterious face.

"Hello, my esteemed, radiant like always..." said Tils, but then he began to blink and softly finished: "I hope that the voyage was good ... excuse me, that's not it. A wonderful evening, I dare say. How are you?"

"Do you want one, Commandant?" said Peggy, holding out a biscuit for him. "Eat to the health of William Brant. You asked about him recently. He'll be returning soon. That's what he wrote two weeks ago. When he comes I'll put a decanter of marvellous rum on that table for you ... without tea, and I'll sit down myself, but for now, you know, step back, because when the waiters come running with their trays they'll jostle you."

"Thank you," said Tils, slowly shoving the biscuit into his pocket. "Yes ... when Brant comes. Peggy! Peggy!" he suddenly burst out.

But he did not say anything else; only his wrinkled cheeks quivered. His gaze was moist and confused.

Peggy was surprised, for the Commandant had never allowed himself to be so familiar. She looked at him intently and even bent over.

Tils could not muster his courage to finish what he had to say—he

couldn't have a woman's terrible cry ring out through the entire hall from behind this cheerful buffet with its cheerful flowers and beautiful crockery. He nervously swallowed the breath of air which, had he let it out, could have struck Peggy down with the words bearing the truth about her Brant, and he cowardly began to trot away, bowing with a twist from the front to the back like an unsteadily spinning top.

Peggy did not discuss the cut of the sleeve with Melly any more. Something strange remained in her brain as a result of Tils's words, "Peggy! Peggy!" She thought about Brant a whole hour, became gloomy, like an extinguished lamp, and finally struck her fist against the marble surface of the bar.

"What a fool I am for not having stopped him!" grumbled Peggy. "He's somehow made me uneasy."

"Don't you realize that the Commandant's drunk?" said Melly. "He was reeking. I could smell it."

Then Peggy cheered up, but from that moment on a black spot lodged in her thoughts, and, when the girl received the sad news in writing from Tils's sister several days later, this black spot served as a spring which softened the heavy blow.

"Here I am, my girl," said Tils, when he finally showed up at home, to the old woman who sat at a sewing machine in a corner of the room. "I'm very tired. All, it seems, is well; everyone's in good health. The voyage was good. I was on *La Traviata,* the *Stella,* the *Abraham Repp,* and the *Record.* I met Captain Halton. 'Hello,' the captain says to me. 'Well done,' he says, 'good lad, Tils. You can still hold a sail to the wind.' He invited me to the theatre. However I'm shy in loud company. We had a drink. He gave me a biscuit, a dollar, and this... No, I'm mistaken, Peggy Scotter gave me the biscuit. Her fiancé died. An unpleasant assignment, but I bravely fulfilled it. You can't imagine the tears, the screaming... I left."

"You didn't tell Peggy anything, brother," replied Rebecca. "I know you well. Go to bed. If you're hungry, take some meat-balls from the bowl on the shelf."

A year passed. The *Record* came again. But the Commandant did not come—he had died from a coughing fit when he choked on some soup. Tils coughed and gasped for so long that a blood vessel burst in

his feeble throat; the old man grew weak, lay down, and after two days expired.

"Something's missing," said Laston to Butler as evening fell. "Who'll relate the various news items to us now?"

He had scarcely uttered these words when a tall, brazen, red-faced fellow, wild-looking and barefooted, hurriedly came onto the deck and then entered the crew's quarters.

"Hello!" he yelled, waving his wild-looking hat. "How was the trip, sailors? Was the voyage good? Is your family still alive? Come, come! Treat me to a glassful!"

"Who are you?" asked Butler.

"The Port Commandant! Tils kicked the bucket; well ... I've taken his place."

Laston smiled grimly, silently stood up, and silently took the fellow by an elbow and dragged him off onto the embankment roadway.

"Here's where you get off," he said. "And don't show up again."

"I like that!" cried out the fellow when he had moved a safe distance away. "If somebody's stolen your boots, don't you buy new ones? And I wanted to do you a good turn—thieves, rascals, scoundrels, shark bait!"

"No, no," Laston, not offended by the fool, answered from the deck. "An obvious forgery. Your jaws will never ask 'Was the voyage good?' the way it should be asked."

1929

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А. Грин

АЛЫЕ ПАРУСА

На английском языке

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics